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Ending Hereditary Slavery in Mauritania: Bidan (Whites) and Black “Slaves” in 2021

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Mauritanian imams undergoing training in Nouakchott. Such training is based on religious books that justify the enslavement of Black Mauritians

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***Hereditary racial slavery – similar to the slavery system that existed in the U.S. prior to the civil war – is still widespread in the West African nation of Mauritania, where White Arabs and Berbers have enslaved Black Africans for centuries. In 1981 Mauritania became the last country in the world to abolish slavery. Though slavery is technically illegal, after being criminalized for the first time in 2007 and again in 2015, abolition is rarely enforced. In a poor country dependant on Western aid, pressure from the United States and its allies can end slavery 'for real' and 'for good' in Mauritania. [Email the President and Congress to demand that they apply this pressure.](#)**

Mauritania, an impoverished, sparsely populated desert country in North-West Africa has the highest proportion of hereditary slavery of any country in the world.¹ Out of 4.75 million citizens, Global Slavery Index estimates the number living in hereditary slavery in the country to be 90,000 people.² In practice, this is descent-based, chattel slavery that treats human beings as property, with violent enforcement. Modern slavery or “slave-like conditions” prevail for up to 500,000 more.³

Slavery in Mauritania is also a racial slavery.⁴ In a country that has a largely destitute population, Mauritania’s Arabic-speaking Arab-Berber elite, an exclusionary and predatory group that self-identifies as White (*Bidan*), ruthlessly dominates the country’s state and economy.⁵ They represent, at most, 30% of the population. The enslaved are Blacks from within Mauritania’s Arab-Islamic linguistic and cultural sphere (Black Arabs or *Sudan*). Blacks freed from slavery, an institution that has lasted many centuries in Mauritania, are called *Haratin* (*Haratin* pl. *Hartani*, male, *Hartania* female). *Haratin* and enslaved Blacks make up 40% of the population. Sometimes the term *Haratin* refers to both “slaves” and freed Black “slaves.” Non-Arabic speaking Black Mauritians – *Halpulaar*, *Fulani*, *Soninke*, *Wolof*, and *Bambara* ethnic groups – were never enslaved by Mauritania’s Whites, though they share the same ethno-racial origin as the Arabized *Haratin*. They make up 30% of the country’s population. In general, all Blacks in Mauritania are referred to as ‘*Abd*, ‘*Abid* (slave, slaves).

Mauritanian scholars and activists Zekeria Ould Ahmed and Mohamed Ould Cire describe ongoing, racialized, hereditary slavery in Mauritania:

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“Because of the nomadic traditions that were prevalent throughout the country until the late 1970s, exploitation (including sexual exploitation), forced labor in the areas of agriculture and livestock breeding, and the sale and granting of slaves were integrated parts of the local social system. Traditionally, [black] slaves were private property to be loaned, given away, sold, or exploited. They had no right to marry without the consent of their masters, to own or inherit property, or to testify in court. As a result, slaves lived in a condition of “social death” and economic exploitation, especially the women. In the Mauritanian slavery system, slavery is hereditary and passed through the mother’s line; therefore, female slaves were expected to be the producers of new slaves for their masters.”⁶

“[Because they are considered their master’s property] in current Arab- Berber society in Mauritania enslaved Blacks can still be sold, rented, exchanged, given away, lynched, beaten, castrated, raped, and exported into slavery in other countries. There are current slave markets in Mauritania, most notably in the city of Arar. Currently, Black slaves in Mauritania herd animals, collect dates and gum Arabic, and work the oases and cultivable fields in the country.”⁷

Hereditary, racial slavery persists in Mauritania despite multiple official attempts to abolish it. The colonial French administration declared an end to slavery in 1905, but never enforced it.⁸ With the phrase “equality for all,” slavery was constitutionally abolished at independence in 1960. In 1981, by presidential decree, Mauritania became the last country in the world to abolish slavery.⁹ However, no criminal laws were passed to enforced the ban.¹⁰ Under international pressure, in 2007 the Mauritanian government passed a law allowing slaveholders to be persecuted.¹¹ However that law has rarely been enforced.¹² Far more anti-slavery human rights activists have been prosecuted than the handful of Mauritanian white “masters.”¹³ In addition, slavers are offered compensation for freeing the enslaved, while the victims of the brutality are offered nothing.¹⁴ In 2015, under international and some domestic mobilization pressure, the Mauritanian government created three special courts to prosecute slavery; but so far they have only tried very few cases.

Despite an obvious reality to the contrary, the white-dominated Mauritanian government and state take the position that slavery is totally finished in Mauritania, and that the talk of it suggests manipulation by the West, an act of



enmity towards Islam, or influence from the world-wide Jewish conspiracy.¹⁵

This paper will attempt to explain why the formal efforts to abolish slavery in Mauritania have failed. Factors include ideology and culture: *sharia*, *fiqh*, and white supremacy; traditional social structure: tribalism and caste; the continuing influence of fictive kinship relationships between Whites, *Haratins*, and *Abid* (Black slaves); a slave economy in a desert environment; and the intransigence of the Mauritanian state and government. The second part of the paper briefly discusses the Mauritanian economy and the government's official views on slavery before concluding with recommendations to end slavery and slave-like conditions in Mauritania.

Part I: Why Racialized Hereditary Slavery Persists in Mauritania

Ideology and Culture: Sharia, Fiqh, and White Supremacy

Several factors explain how Mauritania's *Bidan* (Whites) continue to get away with the devastating exploitation and brutal enslavement of Black people despite formal abolition. Ideology and culture play a role. Islam makes a distinction between its divine law, *sharia*, and the variable (and fallible) human interpretation of *sharia*: *fiqh*. *Fiqh*, in Mauritania, has produced a horrifying interpretation of Islamic law within the Malaki school of jurisprudence that justifies the enslavement of Black people.¹⁶ That version of *sharia* law is enshrined in the Mauritanian constitution, which white slavers—and agents of the Mauritanian legal system—utilize to justify their rights to the free labor of enslaved Blacks even as state laws declare the contrary.¹⁷ White Arabs and Berbers, *Bidan*, take on the role of tutors in Islam and deprive enslaved Blacks of the education needed to form their own understanding of the religion (There is a scholarly consensus that Islam has never permitted the enslavement of fellow Muslims, of any color). As a result, for many devout Blacks in Mauritania, leaving their white “masters” would be a sin and enslavement to them is a religious obligation.¹⁸



Thus, the interpretation of religious law (*sharia*) by *Bidan* in Mauritania contradicts state law that guarantees the freedom of all Mauritians.

Biram Dah Ould Obeid, Mauritania's leading abolitionist and President of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA), led a book-burning of the Maliki texts used to justify the enslavement of Black Mauritians. As an illustration of the perversity of common understandings of Islam in Mauritania, the 2012 "symbolic book-burning"¹⁹ shocked Mauritanian society to the core and led to mass demonstrations against it across the country.²⁰ Obeid and the IRA countered that two types of laws, that are in contradiction, exist in Mauritania to sustain slavery. The constitutionally enshrined slave codes based on Maliki texts written between the 9th and 16th century tend to trump constitutional guarantees of equality among all Mauritanian citizens. Mauritania's slave codes legitimize and codify slavery.²¹ They decree that the Black race is inferior, they authorize the owning of black people, the castration of black men, and the rape of black women. These religious books are currently being used to train Mauritania's imams, their police forces and their judges. Obeid was accused of apostasy and initially sentenced to death for the book burning. Notably, apostasy charges in Mauritania have only been leveled against those advocating human rights, equality, and abolition, never at those that practice slavery and anti-Black racism under the guise of Islam.²²

Hierarchical Social Structure: Tribalism and Caste

Beyond white supremacy, traditional social organization in Mauritania has tribal and occupational dimensions, with enslaved Blacks (*Abid*) and freed slaves (*Haratin*) still at the bottom of the hierarchy. Enslaved Blacks across the centuries were added to the bottom rung of white tribes and the country's caste system. Slavery within *Bidan* society is part of a tribal and hierarchical social structure based on the principle of inequality at birth.²³ In a context in which chances of survival outside the tribal system are remote, across centuries enslaved Blacks in Mauritania became subordinate members of white tribes. A caste system is also part of Mauritanian social structure. Centuries ago, the ancestors of today's



Bidan established themselves as the dominant caste of warrior and religious tribes. Violently forced to perform virtually all agricultural, herding, and domestic labor in the country – for free – *Abid* and *Haratine*. became the lowest caste in the Mauritanian hierarchy. In between the two castes are White griots, artisans, and herders.

The power of caste is subtle, “as a means of assigning value to entire swaths of humankind, caste guides each of us often beyond the reaches of our awareness. It embeds into our bones an unconscious ranking of human characteristics and sets forth the rules, expectations, and stereotypes that have been used to justify brutalities against entire groups within our species.”²⁴ Caste sets the tenor of the way Blacks are viewed and treated in Mauritania.

Fictive Kinship between Whites and Blacks

“Because of the tribal framework in local society, many relationships are still based on tradition; for example, fictive kinship between former masters and former slaves of the same tribe is still meaningful to both” in Mauritania.”²⁵ Familial sentiment along with a shared Arab-Islamic culture largely operate against the interests of *Haratin* and enslaved Blacks (*Abid*). It has led some to their acceptance of subordination. It helps minority Whites (*Bidan*) 30 percent of the population, dominate the country’s political economy, because due to deference they largely garner the political and social support of *Haratin*, who represent 40 percent of the population.

A handful of elite *Haratin* families, *Haratin* defined as freed enslaved Blacks from within the Arab-Islamic cultural sphere, have owned “Black slaves” themselves. A token number gain high-level government positions as long as they represent White interests on slavery, anti-Black racism, and other policies.²⁶ Large numbers of *Haratin* participated in the 1989-1991 forced expulsion to Senegal of 70,000 non-Arabic speaking Black Mauritians, despite most of them having no links to the country.

Subordination is still the only position available to elite *Haratin* who accept the



status quo:

“These were freed slaves, legally persons with the corresponding rights to own property, enter into contracts, and bequeath possessions to their children. Nevertheless, they were not equals of the nobles and remained tied in various ways to the families of their old masters. Their responsibilities varied depending upon whether they continued to live as part of those families, or established themselves as independent herders or cultivators. They owed “hospitality to former masters and members of their masters’ families, and usually gave them annual payments or presents in kind.”²⁷

Part II: The Political Economy of Slavery and State Complicity

It’s telling that traditional, descent-based chattel slavery in Mauritania is most tenacious in the more isolated rural areas of the desert (The surface area of Mauritania is 90% desert).²⁸ The labor of enslaved Blacks is central to the economic structure of these areas. Slaves herd the animals, tend the palm trees, and grow the grain under them, that makes life possible. Added to that, isolation and few alternatives to obtain food and water helps enforce social organization based on a racialized hierarchy and hereditary slavery. Due to few alternatives in a desert and a hostile Mauritanian state and government, many enslaved black Mauritians rightfully fear that they would perish if they left their white “masters” who control nearly all land, oases, water resources, and animal herds.²⁹

A large percentage of the contemporary Mauritanian state elite (virtually all white) – government functionaries, presidents, diplomats, ministers, mayors, governors, senators, judges, religious leaders – own “Black slaves” themselves.³⁰ Local authorities, especially governors and mayors, refuse to register and address complaints filed by enslaved Blacks.³¹ Thus, the people who arrest, prosecute, and judge persistent slavery are deeply invested in the institution’s continuation.³²

These slavers utilize their positions in power to sustain their heritage of hereditary slavery targeting black people.



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Slavery is tied to other forms of racial oppression in Mauritania. The white Arab-Berber elite utilizes their control of the Mauritanian state to advance their material interests.³³ They treat the country's treasury as their personal bank account.³⁴ Due to virulent racism, Black Mauritians are harshly discriminated against in terms of education and economic opportunities – the only real routes to overcoming slave legacies. *Haratin* are nearly completely locked out of the country's land market, working on farms as slaves or sharecroppers (who, in addition to giving white Moors the largest portion of the harvest, have to pay the Islamic tax for the poor, zakat, 'to their masters').³⁵

State violence in support of the oppression, exploitation and enslavement of black people helps to sustain slavery and racism in Mauritania. The white Arab-Berber dominated military, national guard, and police act to sustain the status quo. Revolt against any of the multiple forms of slavery in Mauritania leads to *Haratin* being dragged to police stations and national guard offices, where they are beaten into submission.³⁶ There are cities, villages, and desert encampments in Mauritania where torture and lynching take place on a regular basis.³⁷ In 1999, in Guerrou, a city in South-Central Mauritania, white senators and judges participated in the collective lynching of numerous *Haratin*.³⁸

Mauritania's white state elite deploy an ideology of silence and denial to deflect attention from the racial slavery in their midst. "Anytime the question of the enslavement of *Haratin* is brought up [to Mauritanian officials], it is confronted with denial and defensiveness that are couched in terms of national security and social cohesion."³⁹ To preserve the status quo, the *Bidan* has made it a taboo to discuss slavery.⁴⁰ Finally, special courts and laws criminalizing slavery in Mauritania have not been enforced.⁴¹

Recommendations

Despite its formal abolition multiple times, political, economic, social, and religious factors account for the persistence of racialized hereditary slavery in Mauritania. A two-fold human rights campaign could abolish slavery for good in Mauritania.⁴² On the one hand, the campaign must aim at the directly affected people, either freed or in servitude.⁴³ On the other hand, it should be directed



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toward the authorities in charge of enforcing legal mechanisms and the international community.⁴⁴

In order to emancipate people in servitude from their “masters”, education is key.⁴⁵ Reducing illiteracy and educating enslaved Mauritanians about their human rights, and domestic, regional, and international legal protections against forced servitude, would make them more independent. Religious education is equally important. Both activists and educators should be able to counter discrimination and anti-Black racism propelled by slave-owners under the guise of Islam.⁴⁶ Education should also target the belief among the enslaved that they are parts of their white master’s tribe and family, despite horrific exploitation by them.

It is also critical that freed people have sufficient economic opportunities to live an emancipated life.⁴⁷ Development programs or affirmative action – especially access to landownership – benefiting black Mauritanians should be launched or strengthened.

Greater domestic, regional, and international pressure needs to be exerted on the Mauritanian government in order for it to acknowledge the persistence of slavery and oblige it to enforce abolition laws, including using victim support mechanisms that are not in place currently.⁴⁸ Diplomacy by neighboring states and Islamic countries with relatively good human rights records could be very effective.⁴⁹ Mauritania is a member of the African Union, The AU could use its power as a regional organization to pressure the Mauritanian government to end slavery by naming, shaming, and imposing sanctions on its continued practice.⁵⁰

The UN and the United States must be more forceful in their condemnation of slavery in Mauritania, including through conditionality of aid and other measures.

Pressure on the Mauritanian government to end slavery could also be effectively exerted by mobilizing racial solidarity between African-Americans, who have a history of enslavement by Whites (*Bidan*), and enslaved Black Mauritanians.



Endnotes

1. See Kevin Bales "Review *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*". *Human Rights Quarterly*. **22** (3): 867–872; [Global Slavery Index 2013. Mauritania](#). *Globalslaveryindex.org*. Walk Free Foundation.
2. Official Mauritanian policy denies the existence of both traditional and modern slavery, bans their study, and refuses to undertake demographic analyses of both slavery and race/ethnicity in Mauritania. Informed speculation about the continuation of hereditary slavery in Mauritania is widespread. See "[Global Slavery Index country data - Mauritania](#)". *Global Slavery Index*. Retrieved May 2021; Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, "The Politics of the Haratin Social Movement in Mauritania, 1978-2014," in Osama Abi Merched, *Social Currents in North Africa: Culture and Governance after the Arab Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Bruce Hall, quoted in Alexis Okeowo (8 September 2014). "[Freedom Fighter: A slaving society and an abolitionist's crusade](#)". *The New Yorker*. Retrieved May 29, 2021. Mohamed Ould Cire, in *La Mauritanie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014) also attests to the continuation of traditional, hereditary, racial, chattel slavery in contemporary Mauritania. In a 2009 UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, Gulnara Shahinian, noted that "serious cases of slavery, both in its traditional and modern forms, persist in Mauritania. The International NGO, Anti-Slavery states that "Mauritania is one of the last countries in the world where people are still born into slavery and literally owned by other people, facing a lifetime of abuse and forced labour." <https://www.antislavery.org/what-we-do/mauritania/>
3. John Sutter and E. McNamee, "Slavery's Last Stand," CNN.com March 2012. Accessed May 29th , 2021.
4. There are also attenuated and milder cases, and according to Zekeria Ould Ahmed, comparatively few at this point, of slavery among non-Arabized Black African ethnic groups. See Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, op. cit.
5. Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, op.cit
6. Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, "The Politics of the Haratin Social Movement in Mauritania, 1978-2014," in Osama Abi Merched, *Social Currents in North Africa: Culture and Governance after the Arab Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
7. Helene Aastrup-Samuels and Bo Harringer, "Born Slave" https://wrlc-gu.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma9911446729004101&context=L&vid=01WRLC_GUNIV:01WRLC_GUNIV&lang=en&search_scope=DN_and_CI&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=Everything&query=any.contains.slavery%20mauritania&sortBy=rank&facet=rtype,include,videos&offset=0
8. E. Anne Mcdougal, "Mauritania: Alive and Well in Mauritania? Slavery and Its Stubborn Vestiges" <https://allafrica.com/stories/201307181120.html>
9. Alexis Okeowo (8 September 2014). "[Freedom Fighter: A slaving society and an abolitionist's crusade](#)". *The New Yorker*. Retrieved May 29, 2021.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Khalid Essesissah, Paradise is Under the Feet of Your Master: The Construction of the Religious Basis of Racial Slavery in the Mauritanian Arab-Berber Community," *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 47 (1), 2016.
13. Ibid.
14. E. Anne Mcdougal, "Living the Legacy of Slavery." <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesafricaines/15068>
15. Alexis Okeowo (8 September 2014). "[Freedom Fighter: A slaving society and an abolitionist's crusade](#)". *The New Yorker*. Retrieved May 29, 2021.
16. Khalid Essesissah, Paradise is Under the Feet of Your Master: The Construction of the Religious Basis of Racial Slavery in the Mauritanian Arab-Berber Community," *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 47 (1), 2016.



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17. The preamble of the Mauritanian constitution names Sharia as the sole source of law. References in other pieces of legislation further buttress this primacy of Sharia. For example, the swearing-in oath of the President of the Supreme Court, that is the top official of the Judicial Power, enjoins him, in the exercise of his functions, to respect 'Sharia, the Constitution and laws'. Article 94 of the Mauritanian constitution establishes a High Islamic Council. See, <https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Mauritania.html#slaveryandstigma>
18. Khalid Esseissah, "Paradise is Under the Feet of Your Master: The Construction of the Religious Basis of Racial Slavery in the Mauritanian Arab-Berber Community," *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 47 (1), 2016.
19. As it is referred to by IRA activists.
20. Khaled Esseissah, op.cit.
21. Ibid.
22. Sutter, J. D.. 2012. Slavery's last stronghold. CNN. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2012/03/world/mauritania.slaverys.last.stronghold/index.html?hpt=hp_c1
- 23.
24. Ibid, p. 18.
25. Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, "The Politics of the Haratin Social Movement in Mauritania, 1978-2014," in Osama Abi Merched, *Social Currents in North Africa: Culture and Governance after the Arab Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p, 123..
26. See accompanying interview.
27. E. Anne Mcdougal, "Mauritania: Alive and Well in Mauritania? Slavery and Its Stubborn Vestiges" <https://allafrica.com/stories/201307181120.html>
28. Communication with Mauritania scholar, Matt Buehler, March 2021.
29. Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, op.cit.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Andree Rutti, "Constructing a Human Rights Campaign: Contemporary Slavery in Mauritania" *UC Santa Barbara Global Societies Journal* 5 (0), 2017.
33. Ould Cire, op.cit.
34. Ibid.
35. Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, op.cit.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid, p. 11.



40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Andree Rutti, “Constructing a Human Rights Campaign: Contemporary Slavery in Mauritania” UC Santa Barbara Global Societies Journal 5 (0), 2017.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.



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