

## **Contemporary Child Slavery in Mauritania**

### **By Libbie Snyder**

For the past 800 years, child slaves in Mauritania have been as invisible in their own community as the country's institution of slavery has been to international eyes. In Mauritania today, an estimated one million of the population live as slaves and approximately half of slaves are children. Slavery in Mauritania is unique not only for its centuries-old continuation, but also for its deep-rooted acceptance in the minds of the slaves. Child slavery is fundamentally ingrained into a hierarchical social structure whereby slaves are born, raised, and die all the while accepting their inherited status. Unlike the Atlantic slave trade, little violence is necessary to maintain Mauritanian slaves' subordination, as few question their position or even contemplate escape. As a result, child slaves in Mauritania experience greater independence and less violent treatment than slaves in different societies, such as Sudan. However, Mauritania's slavery is unique for its quality of acceptance among all members of society so that escaped or freed slaves are not welcomed and face limited to zero opportunities for success or advancement. Ultimately, enslavement in Mauritania is more of a mental mindset than a physical constraint. This paper will analyze the various forces that maintain child slavery; these include the country's social structure, corruption in the government, religious doctrine, racism, heredity, and attitudes of the slaves themselves. The combination of these factors interacting in an 800-year old system results in what one abolitionist described as "what the American plantation owners dreamed of—the breeding of perfectly submissive slaves".<sup>1</sup>

### **Definitions**

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<sup>1</sup> Harter, Pascale. "Slavery: Mauritania's Best Kept Secret." BBC News. 13 December 2004. BBC News Online. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/4091579.stm>, p. 2.

When using the word slavery, the most common image is that of black male slaves in shackles aboard cross-Atlantic ships. This stems from the Atlantic slave trade model, in which violence was the primary mode of capturing and maintaining slaves, primarily adult black men. These slaves traveled great distances, had no rights, and were bought, sold, and traded at open slave markets. In Mauritania, a different definition of slavery is needed. Slaves in Mauritania are usually born slaves rather than captured, they tend to remain with the same master, violent treatment is more rare than common, and open slave markets no longer exist. *Anti-Slavery International* supplies a definition of slavery that applies appropriately to Mauritania: a slave is “one, forced to work—through mental or physical threat; two, owned or controlled by an ‘employer’, usually through mental or physical abuse or threatened abuse; three, dehumanized, treated as a commodity or bought and sold as ‘property’; four, physically constrained or has restrictions placed on his/her freedom of movement”<sup>2</sup>.

Slavery is generally defined as the opposite of freedom. But as Paul Lovejoy points out, freedom is a relative concept<sup>3</sup> because no member of society has absolute freedom. Lovejoy offers a definition of freedom as “a recognized status... [including] a bundle of rights and obligations that varied considerably with the situation but were still distinct from those for slaves, who technically had no rights, only obligations... power was in the hands of the free”<sup>4</sup>. While many think of freedom and slavery as opposites, in Mauritania there is little to no distinction between freed slaves and current slaves.

In contrast to the Atlantic model, human beings of all ages live as slaves in Mauritania. Since this paper focuses on child slaves, it helps to use the United Nations’

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<sup>2</sup> Van den Anker, Christien, ed. *The Political Economy of New Slavery*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Lovejoy, Paul E. *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

definition of a child as “any human being below the age of 18”<sup>5</sup>. It is unknown exactly how many children are slaves in Mauritania because of the difficulty in measuring statistics in an undeveloped, desert country. The government hides the real demographic numbers because it does not want to reveal that blacks are the majority; this would threaten their power. *SOS-Esclaves*, Mauritania’s underground abolitionist organization, states “questions related to the socio-cultural composition of the country’s population are considered state-secret”<sup>6</sup>. Because of these difficulties, the range in the number of slaves (both chattel and freed) varies from 15%-45% of the total population. Based on *Central Intelligence Agency* statistics, 46% of the total population of Mauritania is under age 14<sup>7</sup>. Estimates of the total population number for the country range from 2.2 million<sup>8</sup> to 2.9 million<sup>9</sup>. Because these numbers are rough estimates, it cannot be determined how many children are slaves in Mauritania today. However, the figures suggest that as many as half a million slaves qualify as children according to international standards.

### **Historical Context and Social Structure**

The majority of child slaves in Mauritania today are the direct descendants of slaves who were captured in jihad warfare in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Before the 8<sup>th</sup> century there was no Arab presence at all in Mauritania; the country was inhabited solely by black African tribes living along the coast. During the 12<sup>th</sup> century Arab tribes from North Africa were driven

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<sup>5</sup> *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. The United Nations, 1993. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. <http://www.ohchr.org/english/about/publications/docs/fs10.htm>. Retrieved 10 March 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Ould Messaoud, Boubacar. “SOS Slavery Mauritania: Report Year 2001.” *SOS-Esclaves Annual Report*, 2001. <http://www.iabolish.com/sos/SOS-Esclaves-Annual-Report2001-english.rtf>. Retrieved 27 January 2005, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> “The World Factbook: Mauritania.” Central Intelligence Agency, 2005. CIA- The World Factbook. <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/print/mr.html>. Retrieved 10 March 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Bales, Kevin. *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> “The World Factbook: Mauritania.” Central Intelligence Agency, 2005.

south by drought, ecological degradation, and the lust for conquest; they proceeded to fight jihads in order to spread Islam and consolidate power. During these wars many Africans fled south towards the Senegal River except for those who were captured as slaves. While these original slaves were captured through violent means, over time violent capture has lessened as “more than enough are simply more into bondage”<sup>10</sup>.

The descendants of the Arabs who captured the slaves eight centuries ago are also the masters of those slaves’ descendants. The masters are called Arab-Berbers, Moors, or Bidanes, and they dominate the government despite representing less than thirty percent of the population. The Arab-Berber group encompasses pastoral nomads, settled cultivators, merchants, clerics and warriors<sup>11</sup>. Mauritania’s government is an Islamic republic based on a combination of Shari’a (Islamic law) and French civil law.

One of the largest groups of the population, estimated at 400,000, is the Haratine. Their name derives from the Arabic word for freedom, as they are perceived by the rest of society as freed slaves. Haratine are African ex-slaves who were freed on paper by the 1980 abolition, yet continue to serve their masters because they are so economically and culturally attached to them. They are Muslim, speak Arabic, and are considered to have lost every single aspect of their African origins except their skin color<sup>12</sup>. The next subordinate group in society is chattel slaves, of which there is an estimated 90,000 today. These slaves are called abids, or ab’d singularly, and their lives and status as slaves remain unchanged despite the

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<sup>10</sup> “Country Report: Mauritania. An 800-Year-Old System of Black Chattel Slavery Thrives in Mauritania.” The American Anti-Slavery Group. <http://www.iabolish.com/today/background/mauritania.htm>. Retrieved 27 January 2005, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Segal, Ronald. Islam’s Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora. New York: Farrar, Straus and Goroux, 2001, p. 183.

<sup>12</sup> “Mauritania: A Future Free From Slavery?” Amnesty International. 2002. <http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGAFR380032002>. Retrieved 8 February 2005, p. 4.

1980 abolition. The rest of the population is made up of free black African tribes who mainly live on the southern coast, such as the Fulani, Peul, Soninke, Wolof and Bambara.

### **Economy**

Mauritania is located on the northwest coast of Africa, south of Western Sahara and north of Senegal. Multiple sources site Mauritania as having the lowest population density in the world, for a country that is over 1 million sq km<sup>13</sup>. One of the effects of having such a low population density is that there is an even higher demand for labor, which explains in part why the ruling Bidanes feel an exceptionally strong resistance to eradicating slavery.

Mauritania is a desert country, and over one-third of the land is completely uninhabitable.

Traditionally, their economy has subsisted on agriculture, livestock, fishery and trade.

Mauritania has extensive deposits of iron ore which earns little profit because of the decline in world demand for iron. Their deficiency in natural resources is part of the reason why Mauritania's foreign debt is currently five times the amount of their annual exports<sup>14</sup>. In a country where there is so little potential for wealth and development, citizens manage to stay alive because of the tightly knit social order and division of labor. Ancient customs reign in people's everyday survival routines.

Attempts at communication are slow and difficult. Mauritania has one state-run radio station, one television station, two paved highways, and three percent of homes have telephones<sup>15</sup>. The government controls the media, making it impossible to coordinate any contact, solidarity, or unification among slaves. Most slaves have never heard of the concept

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<sup>13</sup> Bales, p. 91.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>15</sup> Diallo, Garba. "Mauritania: Basic Facts." Durumam Dazzel homepage of Garba Diallo. 2003. <http://www.garbadiallo.dk>. Retrieved 10 February 2005.

of abolition, nevertheless the actual abolition laws that were passed. Tackling barriers to information and education is necessary to get slaves involved in their struggle for freedom.

### **Abolition Laws**

Over the past century, Mauritania has outlawed slavery four times. The four official abolition laws were passed in 1901 and 1905 by France (its colonizer), in 1961 by the United Nations when Mauritania became independent, and in 1980 by President Haidallah. The problem with the abolition laws is that none of them clearly define what constitutes slavery, which leaves many forms still legal. These laws, including the 1980 one, do not criminalize slave-owning and not one person has been arrested or prosecuted in violation of the law<sup>16</sup>. In 2003, the U.S. State Department made a request to Mauritania to extend the meaning of the law from forced labor between employers and workers to include all other contexts and forms of slavery<sup>17</sup>.

The other major problem with the abolition laws is that they mention the right to compensation but do not clearly define *who* should be compensated—the master or the slave. The Mauritanian anti-slavery organization *SOS-Esclaves* points out that as long as a master abstains from claiming compensation, he can keep his slaves<sup>18</sup>. Ronald Segal states that the 1980 law “was merely a fiction that did nothing to change the facts...it has been little more than propaganda for foreign consumption”<sup>19</sup>. In a sense, the abolition laws have done more harm than good by giving the international community the impression that slavery is over when in fact the law serves only to further disguise the plight of child slaves.

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<sup>16</sup> Skinner, Benjamin E. “Slavery is Their Reality.” *Newsweek* 18 November 2002: 43-44.

<sup>17</sup> “Mauritania: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.” *U.S. Department of State*, 2003. Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/29677.htm>. Retrieved 8 February 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Ould Messaoud, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Segal p. 205-206.

## How a Child Becomes a Slave

Every slave in Mauritania was also a slave as a child; it is rare to become a slave as an adult. There are three ways that a child becomes a slave in contemporary Mauritania: through birth, being given away or sold, or by capture. The vast majority are born into slavery by being born to a slave mother, regardless of who the father is. The child of a slave woman automatically becomes the slave of the mother's master, regardless of whether or not the master fathered the child.

Slaves are not allowed to marry without the master's consent. Sometimes the masters will arrange slave marriages such that strong black males are placed with strong black females and the Arab families who arrange these 'marriages' divide up their rights to the children borne of the unions<sup>20</sup>. Slave women are bred many times by different slave men. Slave women can also be stripped of their right to motherhood, as their children can be taken from them and sold off or given away as wedding presents or religious gifts. Child slaves are also donated to the poor as an Islamic act of charity. One escaped slave named Moctar Teyeb explains how "the rich Bidane transfer slaves to the poor Bidane, as part of their *zakat* payments. This leads to the extraordinary situation...where the poor sometimes have more slaves than do the rich"<sup>21</sup>. By giving away the children of one's slaves, a master is able to keep a tighter hold on the slave mother. A slave mother is less likely to disobey or attempt to escape when she does not know where her children are, and only her master possesses that information.

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<sup>20</sup> Cotton, Samuel. Silent Terror: A Journey Into Contemporary African Slavery. New York: Harlem River Press, 1998, p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> Pipes, Daniel. "Interview with Moctar Teyeb: Slavery Is a State of Mind." The Middle East Quarterly VI (1999) <http://www.meforum.org/article/453>. Retrieved 24 March 2005, p. 7.

Slave fathers have no rights to their children<sup>22</sup>. A slave husband and father is only recognized if the master consented to the marriage, which masters rarely do. Many slaves do not even know who their father or grandfather is. Slave parents are deprived of the right to leave their property or possessions to their children upon death; child slaves have no rights to any inheritance. This is one of the ways that slavery is perpetuated, as the deprivation of inheritance makes it difficult for child slaves to amass enough wealth in order to buy their own freedom, or the freedom of their offspring.

The master is not legally required to recognize his children with his slaves<sup>23</sup>. The right to reproduce one's slaves in this manner is refused to the women owners of slaves. However, if a master recognizes his slave child he must free the mother and the child<sup>24</sup>. Even after a slave becomes freed, or becomes Haratine, he or she will continue to pay tributes to their former masters. These tributes are usually provided through annual payments in cash or presents, and this obligation passes from one generation to the next in endless succession<sup>25</sup>. A master maintains inheritance rights over their freed slaves' property for the rest of the Haratine's life, so that Haratines are never really free.

On the other hand, fictive kin relationships sometimes develop between members of the master family and members of the slave family. Fictive kin is a concept used to describe individuals who are not related by blood but consider one another as members of the same family. Kevin Bales, a researcher in Mauritania, explains how

slave women feed, care for, and raise their master's children. They serve the women of the master's household, and respect and even affection may grow on both sides of the relationship. Male slaves may see their own parents, in their old age, cared for by the master. Generations of exploitation do not necessarily

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<sup>22</sup> Bales, p. 111.

<sup>23</sup> Diallo, <http://www.garbadiallo.dk>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Segal, p. 183.

translate into generations of resentment, as slave families and their masters confront drought and hardship together.<sup>26</sup>

Some Mauritians feel the question of kinship is an excuse used to justify the relationship between master and slave. One former slave named Messaoud ould Boulkheir, who is currently the President of an underground Mauritanian anti-slavery organization called *El Hor*, refutes this claim: “It is obvious that Haratines are members of their master’s group as the animals bear the mark of the tribe. I would like to ask...if the horse has a form of kinship with its rider and a colonized people with his colonizer”<sup>27</sup>. Different sources clash on this subject, but it is safe to allow for the possibility of fictive kin relationships depending on the slave and master.

Other than birth, the next most common way for a child to become a slave is by being given away or sold. Child slaves can be given away by their relatives, masters of their relatives, or religious members of society as wedding gifts, religious gifts, and charity to the poor. They can also be granted as a coveted object to an Arab boy at the moment of his circumcision. Additionally, child slaves are traded (primarily domestically) for cars, camels, and guns. Open slave markets are a phenomenon of the past; slave markets today are highly mobile, situational, and discussions around the buying and selling of slaves are coded<sup>28</sup>.

Usually the negotiations take place between Moor families in their homes. The cheapest price for a child slave in a 1996 report was \$15 US<sup>29</sup>. According to a 1999 source, a young male slave could be sold for \$500-\$700 US, a mature female for \$700-\$1000 US, and a young and

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<sup>26</sup> Bales, p. 108.

<sup>27</sup> Ould Boulkheir, Messaoud. “Slavery in Mauritania.” Trans. Mr. A. Diba. *CASMAS: The Coalition Against Slavery in Mauritania and Sudan*. 19 February 1998. <http://members.aol.com/casmasalc.boulkhei.htm>. Retrieved 27 January 2005, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Cotton, Samuel. “Demographics and the Modern Slave Trade.” *The City Sun*. 29 March 1995. Also printed in *CASMAS: The Coalition Against Slavery in Mauritania and Sudan*. <http://members.aol.com/casmasalc/demographics.html>. Retrieved 27 January 2005, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Gregory, Joseph R. “African Slavery 1996.” *First Things* 63 (May 1996): 37-39, p. 3.

healthy female for even more<sup>30</sup>. Girls are more expensive than boys because of the value of their sexual services and reproductive ability. The prices for child slaves today are relatively high purchase costs, and in that regard it is similar to the Atlantic model, where slaves were sold for 20 British pounds in the mid-nineteenth century<sup>31</sup>.

The third way a child becomes a slave is by kidnap or capture. There are reports of children being abducted and brought to the United Arab Emirates as camel jockeys. According to one 2004 source, “children as young as five or six are kidnapped, sold by their parents or taken on false pretences and trained to ride racing camels. They are often injured in the racing and maltreated by the trainers... the practice continues and children have been filmed riding in camel races in the 2002 season”<sup>32</sup>. More evidence of this can be found from the many court cases of parents fighting to get their children back.

There are controversial reports of Arabs who travel through black communities and snatch children from the street. According to a Mauritanian man named Mamadou Bocar Ba,

Some white Arabs go traveling about like normal people around cities and villages, and when they see black kids alone playing outside the village, they generally capture those kids. They are traveling with their camels...so they have a big basket. They put the child in the basket...and then they run away with the child...and they still do that in 1995<sup>33</sup>.

This claim has been refuted by one researcher named Lance Kinne who claims that Mamadou Ba’s motivation in making this statement “stems in part from his desire to form a political coalition between black Moors and black Africans, uniting in opposition to the white

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<sup>30</sup> Bales, p. 86.

<sup>31</sup> Ransford, Oliver. The Slave Trade: The Story of Transatlantic Slavery. Great Britain: Cox & Wyman Ltd., 1971, p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> Van den Anker, p. 58.

<sup>33</sup> Cotton, Silent Terror, p. 84-86.

Moors”<sup>34</sup>. While there is a lack of hard evidence for this particular abduction practice, Lance Kinne goes too far in stating that slavery does not exist.

### **A Child’s Entrance into Slavery**

When an ab’d child is born, he or she lives and plays alongside the master’s children until age five or six. Once a child reaches this age, he or she begins to serve the master by waiting on members of the master’s family, herding the cattle, watering the animals, pulling and carrying water from wells, looking after the land and the plants, gathering wood, cooking, and cleaning. The duties of a slave child vary by geographical location. In the countryside slaves tend livestock, do agricultural labor, fetch and carry, and haul water; in the cities they carry out domestic chores. Slaves are used for a variety of tasks and are not encouraged to specialize in any particular skill, as this would grant the slave an ability to succeed outside the master’s home. Preventing slaves from advancing in any particular skill is yet another way for masters to keep their slaves weak and dependent.

Child slaves sleep either on the ground, in garages, or in lean-to’s made for animals. They are not permitted to attend school and most are illiterate; many slave children cannot count and do not know how old they are. Most slaves go by only one name, and for many male slaves that name is Bilal<sup>35</sup>. *The American Anti-Slavery Group* states that slave children are forbidden from touching the Koran and praying in the mosque “because of their impure dark skin”<sup>36</sup>. Slave children do not receive any medical treatment and the government relies

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<sup>34</sup> Kinne, Lacey. “The Benefits of Exile: The Case of FLAM.” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 39 (2001), p. 612.

<sup>35</sup> Bales, p. 100.

<sup>36</sup> “Country Report: Mauritania. An 800-Year-Old System of Black Chattel Slavery Thrives in Mauritania.” *The American Anti-Slavery Group*, p. 1.

on foreign donors for immunizations for diseases<sup>37</sup>. Abid children wear ragged clothes from Europe, do not have shoes or sandals, and survive off rice, couscous, and left-over bones and scraps from the master's meal. Kevin Bales describes slave children as

bony and stunted, often showing cuts and wounds that are slow to heal on their malnourished bodies...I found lean-tos and shacks that I first took to be crude shelters for goats. From these emerged very dirty slave children dressed in rags...[they] play in the dirt street; their toys were bleached animal bones and old tin cans.<sup>38</sup>

Slave children receive no money but their owners claim that the shelter, food and clothing they provide is the child's salary.

### **Crisis of Identity**

Abid children notice the differences between themselves and other children around age five to eight, and this can erupt into confusion of identity. *The American Anti-Slavery Group* documents the story of one escaped slave named Ahmeimidi Ould El Khaliva who first realized he was a slave at age five because people called him by his mother's name instead of his father's. Because his parents were slaves and their marriage was not legally recognized, he was considered a bastard child. While this awareness was taking hold, he suffered a beating for trying to play with some bidane children his own age, and was told "You are a slave. You can't play with these children"<sup>39</sup>. This type of experience has varying impacts on different children. Some like Ahmeimidi internalize and accept their situation, while others such as one woman named Maalouma Messaoud never cease resenting their situation.

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<sup>37</sup> "Mauritania Q&A." *American Friends Service Committee*, February 1998. <http://members.aol.com/casmasalc/mauritan.htm>. Retrieved 27 January 2005, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Bales, p. 97.

<sup>39</sup> "Born Into Bondage: Escaped Mauritanian Slave Recounts His Journey to Freedom." Trans. Moctar Ould Abderrahamne. *The American Anti-Slavery Group*, September 2001. <http://www.iabolish.com/act/abol/profile/khaliva.htm>. Retrieved 10 February 2005, p. 1.

Maalouma Messaoud, a former slave, is now the Bureau Chief of *SOS Esclaves*. She became aware of her enslavement at age eight when the other children from her neighborhood went off to school and she wasn't allowed to go. She protested to her parents and they encouraged her to accept life as a slave, but she had her own instincts:

Becoming aware of my own suffering was a massive crisis of conscience... Sometimes you could find me sitting around sad, with my arms crossed in front of me. Sometimes you could find me wondering to myself: 'why am I enslaved?' Sometimes you could find me crying through the night, unable to sleep. All my life in slavery was painful and sad. I was never at ease.<sup>40</sup>

Maalouma describes her astonishment when she realized her neighbor slaves did not "imagine that they could leave...they would even laugh sometimes, as if in a normal life"<sup>41</sup>. While some children like Maalouma instinctively feel that slave life is wrong and unjust, the majority of slaves do not question their position.

Another former slave named Moctar Teyeb told the *Middle East Quarterly* that he first questioned his enslavement at age four or five. He describes how he "instinctively felt" that the system was wrong, but he "was the exception" in thinking this way<sup>42</sup>. Teyeb explains that his instinct was the only resource he had for knowing whether or not slavery is wrong, since slaves have no access to education or information about abolition. Also, it is hard for child slaves to reject slavery when their parents have accepted it and encourage the children to do the same.

While child slaves notice something amiss about slavery at a young age, the children of masters do not sense this until later in life. One former slave-owner turned abolitionist, Abdel Nasser ould Yessa, describes how he and his five slaves played together as children

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<sup>40</sup> "Breaking Free From the Bonds of Slavery: An Interview with Maalouma Messaoud." *The American Anti-Slavery Group*. December 2003. <http://www.iabolish.com/act/abol/profile/maalouma1.htm>. Retrieved 27 January 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Pipes, p. 1.

and they started serving him at age six. However, Yessa did not feel there was anything wrong with slave practices until he turned sixteen, at which point he became educated on the principles of human rights<sup>43</sup>. It took exposure to the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau, and not his home surroundings, to make him think about abolition.

In most cases, it will be older slaves and not members of the master family who encourage younger slaves to accept their lot. Kevin Bales explains why adult slaves feel so strongly about accepting slave life: “deeply believing that God wants and expects them to be loyal to their masters, they reject freedom as wrong, even traitorous. To struggle for liberty, in their view, is to upset God’s natural order and put one’s very soul at risk. They push these ideas hard onto the younger slaves, urging them to make the best of their position”<sup>44</sup>. Another reason why adult slaves encourage their children to accept slavery is because masters will reward loyal slaves<sup>45</sup>. So by making one’s children into dedicated slaves, slave parents will be trusted and treated better by their master.

### **Ideology**

Every source on Mauritanian slavery mentions the use of religion as a tool to maintain slave obedience. Mauritania is an Islamic state that relies on a combination of French civil law and Shari’a, but the Shari’a is held as the highest source of law<sup>46</sup>. The Mauritanian government, courts, and religious leaders have taken advantage of the Koran’s allowance for certain forms of slavery to justify their widespread slave practices. According to Bernard

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<sup>43</sup> “Freedom Does Not Fall From the Sky: Mauritanian Anti-Slavery Leader Abdel Nasser Ould Yessa on His Journey from Slave Owner to Abolitionist.” *The American Anti-Slavery Group*. September 2001. <http://www.iabolish.com/act/abol/profile/yessa1.htm>. Retrieved 27 January 2005, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Bales, p. 108.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 108.

<sup>46</sup> Ould Messaoud, p. 5.

Lewis, Islam regulates and implicitly accepts the existence of slavery<sup>47</sup>. The Koran urges Muslims to show kindness to the slaves they own. A free Muslim cannot be enslaved, but a non-Muslim's conversion to Islam post-enslavement does not require his liberation<sup>48</sup>. All Muslims are supposed to be equal before Allah, and this is where Mauritania strays from the rules of Islam.

Masters and slaves alike are Muslim, yet they are not equal. Yet "the Koran gives no countenance to the idea that there are superior and inferior races and that the latter are foredoomed to a subordinate status"<sup>49</sup>. If all races and all Muslims are equal and naturally free, then there is no way for an Islamic state such as Mauritania to justify the unfair and unfree enslavement of fellow Muslims. Nonetheless, Mauritania has found a way to fuse Islamic doctrine with anti-Islamic practices. In 2002, *Amnesty International* explained how this can happen: "the fact that the Koran demands that those held in slavery are treated well and recommends manumission, but does not fundamentally question slavery, leads to ambiguity"<sup>50</sup>. Slave-owners take advantage of ambiguities in the law to suit their own benefit.

One of the most well-known phrases every slave learns is "paradise beneath your master's feet"<sup>51</sup>. Slaves are taught that the only way to get to heaven is through continual obedience to the master. Kevin Bales explains that the promise of paradise in the afterlife is

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<sup>47</sup> Lewis, Bernard. Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 54.

<sup>50</sup> "Mauritania: A Future Free From Slavery?" Amnesty International. 2002, p. 19.

<sup>51</sup> "Country Report: Mauritania. An 800-Year-Old System of Black Chattel Slavery Thrives in Mauritania." The American Anti-Slavery Group.

important to slaves because life on earth is so appalling<sup>52</sup>. Therefore, slaves will not do anything that could jeopardize their chances of getting to paradise.

### **Mental Acceptance**

What is meant by ‘accepting’ slavery is the embracing of one’s fate as a slave, obeying the master’s orders, not planning or desiring to rebel, and not attempting to escape. A great deal of slaves genuinely believe that it is the right and natural order of things for slaves to be slaves and masters to be masters. *CASMAS*, The Coalition against Slavery in Mauritania and Sudan, interviewed a child slave named Dada ould Mbarek. When asked if he was equal to his master, the boy replied “No, I’m different...Naturally, we blacks should be the slaves of the whites”<sup>53</sup>. Another child slave told *The New York Times*, “God created me to be a slave, just as he created the camel to be a camel”<sup>54</sup>. One of the most disturbing aspects of slavery in Mauritania is the deep-rooted, total acceptance of enslavement in the minds of the slaves.

Abdel Nasser ould Yessa described how he told his former slaves to organize and go free, but the slaves either didn’t listen or laughed at him. While some took his words as a joke, others expressed concern. They said to him, “If slavery ended, we would no longer exist”<sup>55</sup>. What is unique about slavery in Mauritania is that many slaves have to be convinced to want freedom, because many feel safe and secure as they are.

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<sup>52</sup> Bales, p. 106.

<sup>53</sup> Cotton, Samuel. “Arab Masters—Black Slaves.” *The City Sun*. 1-7 February 1995. Also printed in *CASMAS: The Coalition Against Slavery in Mauritania and Sudan*. 1995. [http://members.aol.com/casmasalc/african\\_slave\\_trade.html](http://members.aol.com/casmasalc/african_slave_trade.html). Retrieved 27 January 2005, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> “Country Report: Mauritania. An 800-Year-Old System of Black Chattel Slavery Thrives in Mauritania.” *The American Anti-Slavery Group*, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> “Freedom Does Not Fall From the Sky: Mauritanian Anti-Slavery Leader Abdel Nasser Ould Yessa on His Journey from Slave Owner to Abolitionist.” *The American Anti-Slavery Group*. September 2001, p. 2.

One of the ironies of Mauritanian slavery is that the slaves are often more accepting and more psychologically secure in their slavery than the masters<sup>56</sup>. This is because slave-owners get to attend school, travel, and be educated about the world, so they “know about the international criticism of their practice of slavery”<sup>57</sup>. Slaves, on the other hand, have no education or access to information about abolition. Abdel Nasser Ould Yessa explains how “masters are also enslaved”<sup>58</sup> by the slave system because they are incapable of supporting or taking care of themselves. At age 25 Yessa did not know how to prepare food or wash his clothes<sup>59</sup> because he had been so dependent on his slaves his whole life. Their dependence is another reason why Bidanes do not want slaves to truly experience freedom.

Slaves’ dependence on masters is a major reason why they accept their enslavement. Purely as a means of survival, many slaves choose to remain with their masters. Poverty, persistent drought, and a weak economy leave few economic alternatives. Often, slaves are afraid of what life will be like or what could happen to them outside the master’s home, so they never take the chance. *The American Anti-Slavery Group* explains how “a slave needs a master to protect him or her: to bring them to the hospital...to get by in Mauritanian society. The Bidanes run the government, the military, the courts, the schools. Slaves cannot revolt because they would lose everything”<sup>60</sup>.

Another reason why slaves accept enslavement has to do with historical tradition. Slaves understand that they are direct descendants of hundreds of generations of slaves. By remaining with one’s master, a slave maintains a link to his own family. Often the members

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<sup>56</sup> Bales, p. 88.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 88.

<sup>58</sup> “Freedom Does Not Fall From the Sky: Mauritanian Anti-Slavery Leader Abdel Nasser Ould Yessa on His Journey from Slave Owner to Abolitionist.” *The American Anti-Slavery Group*. September 2001, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

of one slave family will be divided up into different households of the master's relatives, so the only way for the slave relatives to remain connected is by each staying with his master. Additionally, slaves are less likely to attempt to escape when it would entail leaving behind, and hence putting into danger, a member of the family. In a *Newsweek* article from 2002, a former U.S. ambassador to Mauritania named Robert Pugh explains: "It would take a person of enormous energy, with a built-in quest to find a new life, to stand up and walk away"<sup>61</sup>.

*SOS-Eslaves* offers another reason why slaves prefer to remain with their master: "slavery derives from traditional practices which are very old, psychologically interiorized and assimilated by successive generations of men and women totally alienated and having no other identity reference than their master's family"<sup>62</sup>. Here, *SOS-Eslaves* suggests that the fictive kin relationship does develop between masters and slaves, which helps explain why a slave would not care to escape.

Finally, some slaves accept their status simply because they never heard or were never informed of abolition. Many slaves live in rural, undeveloped areas with limited to no system of communication. Often, masters will order slaves to remain on the premises of the household and not interact with any of the neighbors, and this prevents slaves from finding out about abolition. Since most slaves are illiterate and never travel far from the master's doorstep, it is not difficult to hide the secret of freedom from them.

### **Supervision and Independence**

Compared to the Atlantic model, child slaves in Mauritania have greater freedom of movement. Masters who trust their slaves will send them to other villages and even to Senegal to trade goods, fetch water, and purchase supplies. Trusted slaves will also be

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<sup>61</sup> Skinner, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Ould Messaoud, p. 4.

ordered to tend to the herds by themselves. One escaped slave named Ahmeimidi Ould El Khaliva told *The American Anti-Slavery Group* that he “used to herd the animals by myself all the way to the border with Senegal”<sup>63</sup>.

Trusted slaves are even allowed to accompany their masters on trips to Europe and the United States. Maalouma Messaoud’s father used to travel with his master to France, and “a Mauritanian woman who owns slaves will often leave for Paris or New York with her slaves. I know a slave who lived all her life in Morocco with her master”<sup>64</sup>. Masters can afford to grant their slaves some independence because they recognize how deeply dependent and attached their slaves are to them.

### **Slave Agency**

Child slaves rarely exercise any agency of their own. Child slaves are less informed and more dependent than adult slaves, which makes them less adept at manipulating the system. They are unable to amass any wealth since they are deprived of the right to inherit anything from a parent. Because they cannot accumulate possessions, child slaves are completely dependent on their masters for survival. Even after growing up or being freed, Haratines also struggle to maintain their independence from former masters. *The Washington Post* in 2001 published an article about two brothers who were freed from slavery and moved to Senegal. The brothers worked in Senegal for several years and saved money so that they could set up their own business back in Mauritania. When they returned to Mauritania, their former master tracked them down and forced them to hand over all the money they had saved,

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<sup>63</sup> “Born Into Bondage: Escaped Mauritanian Slave Recounts His Journey to Freedom.” Trans. Moctar Ould Abderrahamne. *The American Anti-Slavery Group*, September 2001, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> “Breaking Free From the Bonds of Slavery: An Interview with Maalouma Messaoud.” *The American Anti-Slavery Group*, December 2003, p. 2.

claiming that everything they had belonged to him<sup>65</sup>. Even after growing up, being freed, and living independently for several years, these Haratines were still under the control of the Bidane master. The relationship between masters and slaves through generations is so tightly knit that even time, freedom, and independence isn't enough to break the chain.

### **Violence and Punishment**

Violence is not necessary to maintain slavery and many slaves never experience it, but it does occur. Child slaves can be punished for disobeying orders, not getting out of bed or getting to work on time, being in contact with free blacks, making mistakes, producing dissatisfactory results with their labor, inciting other slaves to escape, attempting or even suggesting the idea of escape, having sexual relations with a member of the master's family, or disappointing the master in any other way. Masters exert violence to assert their authority, instill fear into their slaves, prevent the slave from having normal sexual relations, and discipline any signs of insubordination<sup>66</sup>. The most common forms of punishment are beatings, denial of food, prolonged exposure to the sun with hands and feet tied together, castration, branding, and three gruesome torture methods known as the 'camel treatment', the 'insect treatment' and 'burning coals'<sup>67</sup>.

A report by *Africa Watch* describes the three torture methods given to slaves who seriously infringe upon the master's rule. In the 'camel treatment', a slave is tied around the belly of a dehydrated camel and as the camel drinks water, its belly expands enough to tear apart the slave. In the 'insect treatment', insects are put into a slave's ears and the ears are

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<sup>65</sup> "Forced Labour in Mauritania." United Nations Commission on Human Rights: Sub Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, 27<sup>th</sup> Session. *Anti-Slavery International*. May 2002. <http://www.antislavery.org/archive/submission/submission2002-mauritania.htm>. Retrieved 27 January 2005, p. 2.

<sup>66</sup> "Country Report: Mauritania. An 800-Year-Old System of Black Chattel Slavery Thrives in Mauritania." *The American Anti-Slavery Group*.

<sup>67</sup> Cotton, "Arab Masters—Black Slaves." *The City Sun*. 1-7 February 1995.

waxed shut. The slave's arms and legs are bound and the person goes insane from the bugs running around in his head. In the 'burning coals', the slave is buried in sand up to his waist and coals are placed between his legs, burning slowly. After a while, the legs, thighs, and genitals of the slave are burned<sup>68</sup>. *Human Rights Watch/Africa* reported a 16-year-old boy who suffered the camel treatment in 1988. The boy's master suspected him of wanting to escape because he found the boy on the road when he should not have been there. The boy was an outspoken slave who talked back to the master and made it clear that he did not like slavery. After he endured the camel treatment, the boy was so handicapped that he could no longer perform any tasks<sup>69</sup>.

It is not uncommon for a master to "emancipate" a slave after the slave is permanently crippled by violent punishment. One example of this happened with a seventeen-year-old slave boy who was caught sleeping with his master's daughter. After punishment the boy "had become so handicapped that the master could not use him at all; so he 'emancipated' him"<sup>70</sup>. *Human Rights Watch/Africa* explains that this kind of torture is not only to serve as an example to others but also to insure that the slave will be incapable of having normal sexual relations again. A female slave would be spared this kind of punishment, because they are valued for their reproductive capacity<sup>71</sup>.

Some sources claim that the violence afflicting slaves in Mauritania is not so severe. Moctar Teyeb states that Mauritania's slavery is "long beyond crude and brutal ways", in contrast to Sudan's "raw, violent quality" of enslavement<sup>72</sup>. Teyeb feels that Mauritanian slavery is significantly less violent than Sudan's because murders occur more frequently in

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<sup>68</sup> Cotton, "Arab Masters—Black Slaves." *The City Sun*. 1-7 February 1995.

<sup>69</sup> Cotton, *Silent Terror*, p. 32.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p. 33.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

<sup>72</sup> Pipes, p. 6.

Sudan. Kevin Bales agrees with Teyeb, writing that the beatings slaves endure are “accepted for the sake of discipline”<sup>73</sup>. According to Bales slaves feel that “every once in a while a child or a slave needs the discipline of a spanking to be kept in line”<sup>74</sup>.

There may be another reason why Moors inflict less violence on their slaves than other slave-owners. A Moor businessman is quoted in a World Bank project report for saying, “the Moors may be less violent... They are more subtle but a lot harder in their slavery. They don’t need to beat their slaves, because slaves can’t run away, because Moors totally control all the alternatives to slavery in this society and economy”<sup>75</sup>. In sum, Moors are less violent with their slaves because they can afford to be less violent.

### **Racist Character of Slave System**

One of the most intensely debated issues surrounding slavery in Mauritania is whether or not it is based on racism, as opposed to social status. As in Sudan, slavery in Mauritania breaks down along racist lines<sup>76</sup>. Slaves are black, masters are “white” (Arab), and there is no overlap. The fact that both slaves and masters are Muslim is used as evidence for the racist nature of Mauritanian slavery. Mohammed Athie, a former Mauritanian diplomat, points out that “the nation forbids it. The religion forbids it. Yet slavery goes on. And it is clearly racial in nature... A non-black Muslim is not enslaved, a black one is”<sup>77</sup>. While the issue of slavery is not as black and white as the skin colors of the people involved, racism may indeed play a major role.

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<sup>73</sup> Bales, p. 88.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p. 88.

<sup>75</sup> Smit, Pieter. “Slavery on World Bank Projects in Mauritania.” 27 November 2002. <http://www.xs4all.nl/~pietersm>. Retrieved 10 February 2005, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Gregory, p. 4.

<sup>77</sup> Cotton, “Arab Masters—Black Slaves.” The City Sun. 1-7 February 1995, p. 5.

In a study of Muslim attitudes toward black Africans, Bernard Lewis explains how Africans can be both Muslim and yet inferior in many Arabs' eyes. Lewis writes, "The perception remained...that African Muslims were somehow different from other Muslims and that Africa was a legitimate source of slaves"<sup>78</sup>. According to Lewis, race exceeds religion in terms of one's status. This understanding provides more evidence as to the real reasons why Bidanes converted Africans to Islam: by making everyone Muslim, it gives off the impression that all citizens are equal. This in turn serves to further disguise from international eyes the deeper inequalities that fester beneath the surfaces.

It is hard to determine how "racist" Mauritanian society is because separate laws for blacks and whites do not exist, as there were in apartheid South Africa or the American South. Blacks and whites work together, they are not forced to attend separate schools or live in separate neighborhoods, blacks do not need to carry passbooks, interracial marriage is not illegal, and everyone can vote<sup>79</sup>. Because blacks and whites appear to have equal rights, it is not so easy to define racism as the problem. Abdel Nasser Ould Yessa argues that the domination is not of one ethnic group over another, but rather it is a social hegemony<sup>80</sup>. He points out that many Bidanes are poor and excluded, and some Haratines have high government positions, so it's not so simple to claim that all blacks are subordinate to all whites.

### **Black Enslavement of Blacks**

The debate over the racist aspect of slavery is complicated by the controversy surrounding black enslavement of blacks amongst tribes on the southern coast of Mauritania.

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<sup>78</sup> Lewis, p. 53.

<sup>79</sup> Cotton, *Silent Terror*, p. 99.

<sup>80</sup> "Freedom Does Not Fall From the Sky: Mauritanian Anti-Slavery Leader Abdel Nasser Ould Yessa on His Journey from Slave Owner to Abolitionist." [The American Anti-Slavery Group](#). September 2001, p. 4.

It is not known whether or not slavery is still happening today amongst the African tribes. Some Bidanes have used the issue of black-on-black slavery to justify why their own practices are not racist, since blacks have enslaved each other for millennia. What is surprising, however, is that even *SOS-Eslaves* agrees that slavery still exists among black tribes. In 2001, *SOS-Eslaves* wrote:

Because of evident epidermis reasons slavery is much more visible in [Moor] society. But under the same skin color slavery still exists...in the black African communities. That is why slavery is not a racial problem ...slavery is merely a practice that is distinctive to a particular social order.<sup>81</sup>

*SOS-Eslaves'* agenda is to promote the interests of slaves, yet they maintain the argument that slavery is not racist.

Samuel Cotton presents a counterargument. He argues that slavery does not exist, only discrimination against those whose ancestors used to be slaves. Africans whose families used to be slaves can face discrimination when applying for jobs and marriage prospects<sup>82</sup>. The irony of Cotton's claim is that he expects his readers to believe that the government is lying about only the vestiges of slavery still existing when Cotton himself is arguing the exact same thing for African tribes. It is tempting to believe what Mauritians have to say over what Samuel Cotton, an American, has decided. What is significant about this discussion is how it defends or refutes the claim that Moor enslavement of blacks is based on racism or simply social order.

### **The Overlap between Abids and Haratines**

While there is no overlap between black slaves and white Masters, there is a blurry line between chattel slaves (abids) and freed slaves (Haratines). Although Haratines are supposed to be free citizens, "in reality, it is difficult to distinguish between the status of a

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<sup>81</sup> Ould Messaoud, p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> Cotton, Silent Terror, p. 109.

slave and a freed slave as the alienation each feels is the same”<sup>83</sup>. Freedom is defined as the opposite of slavery, but voices in and outside Mauritania argue that abids and Haratines are the same because they are treated the same. The construction of the name ‘Haratine’ in the first place was intended to make freed slaves seem apart from chattel slaves. But for many Haratines, being called ‘Haratine’ only signifies a new label for a different kind of slave.

One Mauritanian named Demba Ba explains how Haratines are the same as other slaves: “They treat you just like their superior. They come to your house and want to do the dirty jobs. You have to remind them: ‘you sleep with me, you eat with me...we do it together’. But some of them refuse it, and you end up hating them”<sup>84</sup>. This quote highlights how even when a slave is physically freed, he is still mentally attached to the slave life. One of the many problems of eradicating slavery in Mauritania is that even freed slaves are not really free. Giving freed slaves a new name and group identity, and even sending them out on their own into society, does not truly liberate them. Because slaves have no education and no awareness of the world outside their master’s home, they are unable to create an independent existence. The fact that freed slaves and current slaves are easily mixed up reveals how unsuccessful abolition has been, and how the minds as well as the bodies of slaves must be liberated.

### **The Issue of Language**

Changing the language around slavery is vital to changing slaves’ lives. One of the central goals of *SOS-Eslaves*, *El Hor*, *Amnesty International*, *Human Rights Watch/Africa* and other organizations is simply to get the government and international community to recognize that this is a problem of slavery. A human rights consultant to the World Bank said

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<sup>83</sup> “Mauritania: A Future Free From Slavery?” *Amnesty International*. 2002, p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> Cotton, *Silent Terror*, p. 34-35.

“you can’t fight slavery if you don’t name it slavery”<sup>85</sup>. This is the problem in Mauritania: the denial that slavery exists. The language of abolition consists of only words, not action. Because Haratines are thought of as freed slaves and the government signed a document with the word abolition on it, both the plight of actual slaves and the potential influence of international voices have remained silent.

Language is manipulated very furtively in Mauritania. For example, the government has banned the use of the word “slave” from the media, and “people hesitate a little more now in using the word slave, except in anger or as an insult”<sup>86</sup>. Because of this, real slaves are often called something else. *CASMAS* reports the use of “my student”, “my domestic”, and “presents”<sup>87</sup> as substitute names for slaves. But Mauritania isn’t the only government evading the word slave. In 1995, the U.S. State Department’s country report on human rights practices in Mauritania avoided the ‘s’ word, referring instead to ‘vestiges’, the ‘legacy’ of slavery, and ‘servitude’ and ‘near servitude’<sup>88</sup>. During a U.S. Congress session discussing the issue, Congressman Victor O. Frazier exclaimed, “are we playing with words here? Is this not just a fancy way of saying that the State Department will not say there is no slavery in Mauritania but it *will* say that perhaps there are people who work and do not get paid against their will?”<sup>89</sup> This Congressman laid the question right on the line. Both the Mauritanian and international governments have found a way to play with words that responds to anti-slavery concerns while avoiding a major confrontation.

### **Government Corruption**

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<sup>85</sup> Smit, p. 10.

<sup>86</sup> Cotton, “Demographics and the Modern Slave Trade.” *The City Sun*. 29 March 1995, p. 2.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

<sup>88</sup> Cotton, *Silent Terror*, p. 137.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, p. 139.

Not only does the government deny the current problem of slavery, but they have gone so far as saying they have “never known slavery... in either... legal tradition or in practice”<sup>90</sup>. This comment blatantly contradicts French colonial records admitting the existence of slavery, which was the initiative to outlaw it. The government exposes its corruption in five main ways: in the justice system, the abolition laws, hiding information, making slaves invisible, and encumbering anti-slavery organizations.

Injustice for slaves reigns in Mauritanian courts. Boubacar Messaoud explains: “the modern law courts proclaim they have no jurisdiction in the matter and dismiss cases...judges in the Islamic courts almost always rule in favor of the masters, hiding behind tradition”<sup>91</sup>. *Amnesty International* tracked the story of a 14-year-old boy named Taher ould Sidna who was abducted and presumably killed by his father’s former master in 1999. The mother went to court but the chief prosecutor refused to release the investigation report. *Amnesty International* criticizes the government for failing to carry out a full investigation, including the arrest, questioning, and testimony of the suspect<sup>92</sup>.

In regards to the abolition laws, a government official stated “we enacted it just to meet international standards”<sup>93</sup>. Mauritania’s abolition laws were never intended to really eradicate slavery, they were only an exercise in public relations. The government exposes its corruption by hiding civic information, such as in 1988 when it refused to publish the results of a population census<sup>94</sup>. In short, the government does everything it can to make slaves invisible. The government has made it illegal to take pictures on the street—“carrying a video

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<sup>90</sup> “Mauritania: A Future Free From Slavery?” *Amnesty International*. 2002, p. 13.

<sup>91</sup> Cotton, *Silent Terror*, p. 28.

<sup>92</sup> “Mauritania: A Future Free From Slavery?” *Amnesty International*. 2002, p. 15.

<sup>93</sup> Harter, p. 1.

<sup>94</sup> Segal, p. 204.

camera means instant detention”<sup>95</sup>. The government further hides slaves by limiting television broadcasts to Arab and white images, as well as in advertising, tourist literature, museums, and market places<sup>96</sup>.

The government does everything in its power to dismantle human rights organizations within its borders. The only Mauritanian organizations dealing with the problem of slavery, *SOS-Esclaves* and *El Hor*, are both illegal, their leaders have been arrested, and they have been forced to go underground. The government denied *Amnesty International*'s request to enter the country and conduct research on human rights violations. *CASMAS* points out: “if slavery has ended, it is difficult to understand why an organization whose objectives are to improve the life of former slaves should be forced into secrecy”<sup>97</sup>. *SOS-Esclaves* faces hardship because of intimidation, obstruction, lack of resources, and the difficulty of transportation. They also have difficulty encouraging slaves to step forward and lodge complaints because slaves know that they could be severely punished or killed for doing so. As a public relations move, the government consented to setting up two “human rights” organizations of its own: *The National Committee for the Struggle Against the Vestiges of Slavery in Mauritania* and *The Initiative for the Support of the Activities of the President*<sup>98</sup>. These committees enable the government to satisfy the international community that they are handling the *vestiges* of slavery.

### **International Community**

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<sup>95</sup> Bales, p. 82.

<sup>96</sup> Cotton, *Silent terror*, p. 99.

<sup>97</sup> Cotton, “Demographics and the Modern Slave Trade.” *The City Sun*. 29 March 1995 p. 2.

<sup>98</sup> Bales, p. 115.

Boubacar Messaoud states that the United States “just looks at the ‘official story’. They are such fools”<sup>99</sup>. The United States did pass a House Resolution in 1996 not to provide any assistance to Mauritania until the President took appropriate action to eliminate chattel slavery. However, ever since Mauritania became the third Arab nation to sign peace with Israel in 1999, “the U.S. government has chosen to overlook the country’s pervasive system of human bondage”<sup>100</sup>. Because slaves are not dying in rapid numbers as in Sudan, the international community does not act. One writer named Joseph Gregory points out that this situation is pretty obscure, and even though television has turned the world into a global village, all politics are still essentially local politics<sup>101</sup>.

Another reason why the international community prefers to steer clear of the issue is because it involves criticizing a Muslim nation. Kevin Bales argues that the United States and France have to support Mauritania because they need the country as a buffer against Algeria and Libya, and they want to prevent Mauritania from turning fundamentalist<sup>102</sup>. The *NAACP* and The Congressional Black Caucus do not want to get involved because they don’t want “to get into a fracas with the Nation of Islam”<sup>103</sup>. The real reason why many organizations and governments avoid this issue has to do with fear of the wrath of Islamic governments, especially in today’s context.

### **Process of Emancipation**

A slave can become free either by escaping or being granted freedom. It is easier for some slaves to escape than others. A female slave who has children would be reluctant to

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<sup>99</sup> Cotton, *Silent Terror*, p. 122.

<sup>100</sup> “Country Report: Mauritania. An 800-Year-Old System of Black Chattel Slavery Thrives in Mauritania.” *The American Anti-Slavery Group*. p. 1.

<sup>101</sup> Gregory, p. 2.

<sup>102</sup> Bales, p. 116.

<sup>103</sup> Gregory, p. 3.

choose between abandoning her children or attempting to escape as a group. On the other hand, many male slaves have succeeded in escaping. Ahmeimidiould El Khaliva even said “escaping wasn’t difficult”<sup>104</sup>. Alternatively, a slave will be freed when he or she has become more of a burden to the master than a source of profit. This can happen when the slave is weak or crippled as a result of beatings or birth defects, or in times of drought or economic hardship. Messaoudould Boulkheir outlines four main ways a slave can become free: one, through suicide; two, by the will of the master; three, by paying a sum of money to one’s master; and fourth, by forcing the government to grant freedom<sup>105</sup>. An additional way to become free is through the aid of an organization such as *SOS-Eslaves* or *El Hor*.

*SOS-Eslaves* uses ex-slaves to infiltrate nomadic camps in remote parts of the country and distribute information about freedom. They conduct secret meetings with slaves as well as dialogue with slave-owners and the international community. *SOS-Eslaves* prescribes education, mobilization, judicial assistance, and international action as the solution for emancipation. They attempt to open schools in Haratine areas, provide job training in agriculture, fishing, and construction, and organize an annual national convention to educate the Mauritanian public on moving from a master-slave relationship to a partnership.

One of the biggest obstacles to emancipating slaves is slaves’ indifference towards liberty. Given a choice between slavery and freedom, the majority would instead “happily stay halfway between slavery and freedom”<sup>106</sup>. Slaves are ambivalent about freedom; they know that they would like to live in their own house and have more mobility, but they don’t necessarily want independence from their master. Slaves know that freedom of movement

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<sup>104</sup> “Born Into Bondage: Escaped Mauritanian Slave Recounts His Journey to Freedom.” Trans. Moctar Ould Abderrahamne. *The American Anti-Slavery Group*. September 2001, p. 2.

<sup>105</sup> Cotton, *Silent Terror*, p. 111.

<sup>106</sup> Bales, p. 108.

does not guarantee food to eat or work to do<sup>107</sup>. Current slaves observe the fate of ex-slaves living on the street and given this alternative, it makes sense that many prefer slavery to freedom.

### **Post-Emancipation**

The prospects for a child slave to reintegrate productively into society are dismal. Child slaves are not issued birth certificates so they cannot attend school or claim what little state aid exists. As children of escaped slaves, “they have little worth and will be used for the most dangerous and dirty work”<sup>108</sup>. Freed child slaves become street children who face “a precarious material situation, being treated with contempt by those in authority, illiteracy, lack of health care and infringements of the labour code”<sup>109</sup>. Freed slaves confront a hard time getting jobs because they do not have a fixed home or decent clothes. Because the population is so sparse and the social structure so clearly defined, everyone knows where everyone else comes from. Even if a freed slave is fortunate enough to obtain paid employment, his or her job will be taken away as soon as a more respectable applicant comes along. While former slave adults scavenge for jobs and food, child slaves exhibit their vulnerability as they play unaccompanied on the streets. Many former female slaves become prostitutes in order to survive, and their daughters in turn face the same fate. The conditions of life on the street can be worse than the conditions of life as a slave. When faced with these two options, it cannot be surprising why many slaves choose slavery over freedom as a means of survival.

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>107</sup> Bales, p. 108.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 112.

<sup>109</sup> “Forced Labour in Mauritania.” United Nations Commission on Human Rights: Sub Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, 27<sup>th</sup> Session. Anti-Slavery International. May 2002, p. 3.

In western society, slavery is automatically connoted with a negative act that should be absolutely eradicated. But the unique aspect of contemporary Mauritanian slavery is that slaves and abolitionists alike feel that absolute freedom is not the answer. This country may be the only one in the world where total freedom is not the obvious solution for current slaves. Instead, Mauritians argue that there should be a shift toward an equal partnership between master and slave rather than a complete severance. However, it should remain clear that the present dynamic between master and slave is far from beneficial. The BBC correspondent in Senegal, David Hecht, along with others have made the outrageous claim that the present condition of slaves is the best thing all-around because they get to work and eat<sup>110</sup>. Kevin Bales refutes this by reminding his readers that this was the same argument made in favor of slavery in the American South<sup>111</sup>. There is a fine line between the benefits that slaves receive now in their present situation, and the best practical solution for their emancipation somewhere between the master and mobility. The answer to real emancipation is about as hazy as the practice of slavery itself. No one knows Mauritania better than Mauritians, and it is their input that should determine what course of emancipation is acted upon. Regardless of the path taken, immediate action on the part of the international community and the Mauritanian government alike is centuries-overdue. Although slaves may not be dying in fast numbers, the quality of their lives should be no less valuable to the rest of humankind.

### **Summary**

This paper has outlined the plight of contemporary child slaves in Mauritania. It has provided the relevant historical background, a description of the economic situation, and an overview of the social structure and demographics. The influence of Islam, government

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<sup>110</sup> Ould Boulkheir, p 2.

<sup>111</sup> Bales, p. 119.

corruption, and psychological control are fundamental in perpetuating child slavery to this day. The abolition laws have been ineffective in altering the status of current slaves and freed slaves. Child slaves are conditioned to accept their status by their mothers and their masters, which is why little violence is needed to maintain their obedience. There is little distinction between abids and Haratines, which is why many slaves prefer continued enslavement over freedom. Because child slavery is maintained through birth, the most effective means to free them is through anti-slavery organizations and pressuring the government and international community. Child slaves are weak, dependent, and exercise little agency which is why it has been so easy to continue slavery for over 800 years. Unlike slaves in the Atlantic model, child slaves in Mauritania today are best off not with total freedom, but rather with guaranteed employment and salary from their master along with the right to move freely. The key to emancipating Mauritanian slaves is by getting the desire for freedom into their heads. Once that is accomplished, the majority of the population can unite and challenge the government for their lawful rights. The government cannot ignore the voice of over half of its population, as long as abids and Haratines come together with the same aspiration.

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