

IRA Mauritanie: Legacy and Innovation in the Anti-slavery Fight in Mauritania

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Abstract

The fight against slavery in Mauritania is more than 40 years old, but over the past decade it has become more prominent, driven by IRA Mauritanie (*Initiative pour la résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste en Mauritanie*), a non-violent organization led by the abolitionist leader Biram Dah Abeid. Drawing on historical analysis and qualitative research, this article enriches the existing literature on IRA Mauritanie's ideology and activism by showing how it melds elements of innovation with some of the characteristics of previous Mauritanian anti-slavery organizations. Specifically, it demonstrates how, in its claims of a *Haratin* identity (freed slaves and their descendants of black origin), IRA combines new fighting strategies with claims of ethnic autonomy made by previous anti-slavery movements. Contrary to the common view that IRA is an unprecedented threat to the unity of Mauritania, this article argues that while it follows in some of its predecessors' footsteps it is developing new fighting strategies.

Keywords: *Haratin*, slavery, race, Mauritania, identity

Introduction

Ould Mohamed Salem (2003, p. 179) defines Mauritania as the “trait d’union” between the Arab World and sub-Saharan Africa. This “dual-belonging” to different geopolitical categories reverberates in its population¹, composed of “Arabs-Berbers”, referred to as the Beydan (or *bidan*), “black-Mauritanians” (the Wolof, Soninké and Haalpulaar²), and *Haratin*³ (sing. *Hartani*),

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1 According to the Office National de la Statistique, the total population was 3,805,659 in 2016, (ONS July 2017, p. 15); in 2019 it is estimated to be well over 4 million.

2 There are also about 20,000 Bambara. Critiquing the use of the term to refer to an ethnicity, Amselle (1999, p. 104-107) shows its deep connections with the legacy of slavery.

3 The SEDES study (1965), the only report indicating the ethnic composition of the Mauritanian population, reported 25-30% black Mauritanians, 32-36% *Haratin*, and slightly more Arabs-Berbers (Tanguy-Destremau 2012, pp. 259-260). Baduel (1994,

Arabized former slaves and their descendants. Previously described as simply part of Moorish society, the *Haratin* constitute today, according to most of their leaders⁴, a “more and more significant component of the Mauritanian population”, distinct from any other “socio-ethnic category”. In contrast, Mauritanian governments have refused to disaggregate the data in terms of ethnicity and to consider *Haratin* as a distinct “ethnic group”; consequently, the national registration programmes allow Mauritians to register as either “Arab” or a member of one of the black-Mauritanian communities. Beyond the question of whether or not the *Haratin* should be considered as a distinct ethnic group, the fact that some *Haratin* claim a separate ethnic identity has important implications for their identity-politics and political imaginations.

As former slaves or slave descendants, the *Haratin* were absorbed within the Moorish community in a position of dependence or inferiority. Importantly, there is no scholarly unanimity as to how to define the ethnic components of Mauritanian society, nor the relationships between *Haratin* and Beydan⁵. While some scholars define *Haratin* as black Moors⁶, others go as far as terming them *bidan*⁷; others correctly emphasize that “in this transit zone, people find it difficult to come to terms with their multi-level identities. The question is often asked whether Moors are Arab, Berber, African or a combination of

p. 87) estimated the proportions as, respectively, >30%, 30%, and 40%. In 2018 the US Department of State estimated Beydan at 30%, *Haratin* at least 45%, and black-Mauritians at 25% (US Department of State 2018, p. 14). We suppose that over time *Haratin* and black-Mauritians have grown in number to the detriment of Arabs because the former two groups practise polygamy to a greater extent and have higher birth rates. 9,9% is the national rate for polygamy, higher (up to 29%) in the Senegal River Valley (ONS June 2016, p. 34). The birth rate is higher in the *wilayas* (administrative regions) of Gorgol, Trarza, Nouakchott, and Hodh Ech Chargui, and 41% in the wilaya of Guidimakha, where the number of children per family is also higher (ONS November 2016, pp. 19-26).

4 See the “Manifeste pour les droits politiques, économiques et sociaux des *Haratin* au sein d’une Mauritanie unie, égalitaire et réconciliée avec elle-même”, a paper signed by 25 *Haratin* leaders and reported in the press on 29 April 2013.

5 This is an extremely delicate topic to discuss even with *Haratin*, whose responses are often affected by the presence of interpreters or other locals, especially if the interviewee is in a position of dependence.

6 “Arab-Berber Moors make up the majority of the population and refer to themselves as *bidhân* (‘Whites’) even though more than half of the population are, in fact, Black Moors.” (Ould Ahmed Salem 2009, p. 157). So the Human Rights Council (2010, p. 5). McDougall highlights the role played by the French colonisers in promoting the *Haratin* as “Maures Noirs”/“Black Moors” (McDougall 2015, p. 254).

7 The term has different meanings. Taine-Ckeikh (1989, p. 93) highlights the use of the term *bidan* to refer to native speakers of *hassaniyya* (the local Arabic dialect). Villasanté-De Beauvais (2000, p. 15), on the other hand, reminds us that the term cannot be attributed to the slaves of the *bidan*: “[Le] terme endogène *bidân*, il possède deux sens [...]; le deuxième sens renvoie à une distinction statutaire employée au sein de cette société et qui distingue les « hommes libres, nobles » (*bidân*) de ceux d’origine servile”.

all three. Two things they have in common are Islam and a taste for green tea” (Diallo 2005, p. 82). That apart, whether or not the *Haratin* are included within the Arab-Berber community has strong political implications for *Haratin* activists, as they are the majority in the country, whereas the Beydan leadership retains its hold on political and economic power. Far from being just a matter of statistics, therefore, the *Haratin*’s claims of both ethnic distinctiveness and equal access to socio-economic opportunities acquire a clear political dimension. The *Manifeste pour les droits politiques, économiques et sociaux des Haratines* identifies precisely the *Haratin*’s enduring marginalization as the main reason for them becoming an autonomous “entity”⁸.

Haratin anti-slavery activism in Mauritania began with the foundation of El-Hor in 1978⁹, but it has gained prominence recently, both locally and internationally, thanks to IRA Mauritanie (*Initiative pour la résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste en Mauritanie*), the organization established in 2008 and led by Biram Dah Abeid, one of the world’s most renowned anti-slavery activists. IRA has collected several awards for its non-violent fight against slavery and in 2013 Dah Abeid was awarded the UN Human Rights Prize. Because a previous recipient was Nelson Mandela, this made Dah Abeid the “Mauritanian Mandela” in his supporters’ eyes. As I will show in this article, Dah Abeid’s popularity rests on his ability to renew the fight against slavery by promoting an image of the *Haratin* as freed slaves aware and proud of their black origin. Importantly, the *Haratin* are, for IRA, a separate ethnic group, different from both the Arabs and the black-Mauritanians (the Wolof, Soninké and Halpulaar).

In today’s Mauritania, slavery is an extremely delicate issue: whereas IRA states that half of the *Haratin* are in slavery, the government rejects the term *slavery* because it has been abolished and outlawed¹⁰. Similarly, estimating the number of enslaved *Haratin* is difficult. In its *2013 Global Slavery Index*, the international NGO Free the Slaves ranked Mauritania in first place, with about 140,000-160,000 enslaved¹¹ people, and in sixth place in 2018,

8 “L’accumulation des frustrations a eu pour résultat la différenciation galopante dans le tissu social de ce qui était connu, jadis, sous le label de «MAURES», en deux entités de plus en plus distinctes (Bidhanes d’un côté et *Haratin* de l’autre)”. *Manifeste pour les droits...* Capital letters as in original.

9 Before the creation of El-Hor, the fight against slavery was one of the claims advanced in strikes and demonstrations carried out by miners and students supporting the MND-Mouvement national démocratique, born in 1969, from which most radical members left (Baduel 1994, p. 90) to join the PKM-Parti kadihines mauritaniens, created four years later (Ould Mohamed Salem 2003, pp. 180-181).

10 It also opposes attempts to investigate. Cfr. G. Maimone, “Are *Haratin* Black Moors or just black?”, in *Open Democracy*, 13 February 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/are-haratines-black-moors-or-just-black/> (accessed: 13 March 2019).

11 *Global Slavery Index 2013*, Walk Free Foundation.

with an estimate of 90,000 – a decrease linked with the 2015 law introducing stronger anti-slavery penalties¹². According to IRA Mauritanie, enslavement is only the tip of the iceberg of a larger *Haratin* population suffering exploitation, marginalization and socio-political exclusion, which are all consequences of the legacies of slavery and of their black racial connotation.

Because of IRA's focus on race, its leader was accused by some Mauritanian opponents, mostly *bidan*, of fuelling divisiveness and even racism. Moreover, since the state refuses to authorize IRA Mauritanie¹³ its members have repeatedly been prosecuted and arrested during public demonstrations. This happened to Biram Dah Abeid and to the ex-vice-president Brahim Bilal Ramdane, both arrested on 11 November 2014 together with other IRA members and Djiby Sow, the president of the anti-slavery NGO *Kawtal*. Whereas Sow was released on medical grounds in June 2015, the IRA activists were released only twenty months later, in 2016¹⁴.

This article discusses key aspects of IRA Mauritanie's identity politics, in which the legacies of slavery and the question of blackness play central roles. This article suggests scepticism of the view that IRA is an unprecedented threat to the unity of the Mauritanian society, and argues that it follows in the footsteps of the previous Mauritanian anti-slavery organizations while developing new fighting strategies. Specifically, it shows how IRA's "innovative" ideology and strategy revive claims made by previous Mauritanian antislavery movements and political organizations. To do so, this article draws on archival analysis, primary sources, interviews and secondary sources. In order to situate IRA Mauritanie in a broader historical frame, I will provide a historical overview of the Mauritanian anti-slavery movements by focusing first on the colonial period and then on the main organizations and events that have affected IRA's activities. Thereafter I will go on to explore continuities and ruptures between IRA Mauritanie and the previous anti-slavery movements. Far from being the subversive and radical movement that its opponents believe it to be, IRA is just the latest – albeit the major – actor in a decades-long history of antislavery activism in Mauritania.

Slavery and colonialism

Slavery within West African societies began its substantial growth during the seventeenth century (McDougall 2012, p. 44), when increasing numbers of black Africans were captured, traded and sold as slaves within Arab-Berber

12 *Global Slavery Index 2018*, Walk Free Foundation.

13 This is also the reason why a public list of its members is not available.

14 Deploing the "politicization" of the anti-slavery fight led by Dah Abeid, Brahim Bilal Ramdane abandoned IRA Mauritanie after his liberation.

societies. Many were to be employed as farmers, shepherds and domestics, and some also became soldiers (Searing 2000, pp. 27-32). From the seventeenth century onwards, “a race-based identity for Saharans developed: Saharans became ‘white’ masters of slaves who were ‘black’. Gradually, the latter category (*sudan*) was expanded to include all of the inhabitants of the Sudan” (McDougall 2012, p. 44). *Sudan* became the term used by the Arabs and the Berbers of Mauritania to refer to both black slaves and freed slaves (Leservoisiere 2012, p. 159) of black-African origin¹⁵ who had been Arabized and then were distinguished from the *kwar*, the black-African of the South (Leservoisiere 2000, p. 148). For the *bidan*, “it was not the particular content of a ‘white’ identity that was most important, but instead the assurance of not being counted among the blacks” (Hall 2011, p. 38).

France abolished slavery in its colonies in 1848¹⁶ and fought it in the West African communities that came under its control in the following years¹⁷. After slaves started to escape to Saint-Louis in search of freedom, in 1849 the French administration clarified that the 1848 decree applied only slaves living in French territories and not those in the surrounding region¹⁸. The General Act (1890), declared during the Conference of Brussels, confirmed the French commitment to fight slavery in territories under French control¹⁹.

Slaves were emancipated within French-ruled territories, while in other areas under French influence colonial administrators arranged treaties with local chiefs that transformed slavery into 10-12 years of forced labour²⁰. From 1887 the French also created “freedom villages”²¹ in Senegal and French Sudan (Mali), where escaped slaves were accommodated²². Freed

15 Leservoisiere also reminds us that there are differing opinions among scholars about this origin, e.g. Bhrane (1997, p. 123).

16 The 1848 French Abolition Decree was adopted in the French colonies of the time – Guadalupe, Martinique, Guiana, Saint Barthélemy (Schmidt, p. 17). It prohibited all the citizens of French colonies and estates from possessing slaves (Thioub 2012, pp. 4-5).

17 Territorial conquests in West Africa spread rapidly from Senegal in the mid-19th century, including southern Mauritanian territories at the end of the century (ANS-Archives nationales du Sénégal, Dakar, fonds AOF, series O, folder 591 (from now ANS, AOF/O/591), “Esquisse géographique et historique de l’Adrar mauritanien”, Colonel Modat, 2016).

18 ANS, AOF/2K/17, “Dossier serviteurs”, unsigned, undated.

19 The Act is mentioned in many documents of the AOF of the time and especially in a dossier collected from the French Minister of Colonies in 1895 and conserved at ANOM-Archives nationales d’outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence, fonds AOF, series XIV, folder 1 (from now on ANOM, AOF/XIV/1), report 18 December 1895.

20 ANS, AOF/K/17, “Dossier serviteurs”, cit., and ANOM, AOF/XVI/2, “Note sur l’application de l’Acte Général de Bruxelles”, Directeur des Affaires Indigènes, Saint-Louis, 5 December 1895.

21 ANOM, AOF/XIV/2, “Note sur les ‘villages de liberté’”, unsigned, 16 November 1895.

22 In October 1895 about 9,000 former slaves were reported to be living in 44 ‘freedom villages’ in French Sudan. ANS, AOF/17/G/160, letter of the French Sudan Governor to the

slaves received a “freedom certificate” (*certificat de liberté*) that granted them freedom of movement and protection from property claims over them by their previous owners²³. Although the French struggled against slavery within local black communities, it did not disappear but often transmogrified into relationships of dependence that gave rise to new forms of exploitation²⁴ (forced labour, taxation, and military conscription), which themselves over time metamorphosed into social stigmas (Bellagamba 2016).

Freedom villages in Mauritania were limited in number (Acloque 1998, p. 73). After they conquered the northern bank of the Senegal River Valley, the French advanced about 300 km, but on 12 May 1905 the French Governor of the Civil Territory of Mauritania Xavier Coppolani²⁵ was assassinated during a night-time ambush and the advance paused. It restarted in 1908 and from 1909 the newly occupied territories were administered by former Moorish emirs accompanied by French “residents”²⁶. France regarded this form of “indirect rule” as useful for the maintenance of peace, on the assumption that the local population appreciated the socio-economic stability it maintained in the face of their loss of autonomy²⁷. On 15 December 1905, a decree banned the slave trade and established the progressive emancipation of slaves²⁸ but it clashed with the values of a society where the practice of slavery was long-established (Acloque 2000, p. 100), especially after the expansion in Adrar.

Although the French regarded the slave trade as having disappeared in the AOF by the 1920s²⁹, several cases were reported in Mauritania during the 1930s³⁰, such as the famous “Hunkarin Affair”. Born in Dahomey, Louis Hunkarin was sentenced to a 10-year exile in Mauritania for anti-French con-

AOF General Governor, Kolouba, 21 March 1938. Among published works, that of Bouche (1968) probably remains the most fruitful source on freedom villages in French West Africa.

23 In Senegal at the end of the nineteenth century, every year about 1,500 ex-slaves received a freedom certificate after spending three months in a freedom village. ANOM, AOF/XVI/2, “État des Captifs libérés dans les divers Postes de la Colonie en 1894 et 1895”, Directeur des Affaires Indigènes, Saint-Louis, 5 December 1895.

24 Cfr. ANOM, AOF/K/17, “Dossier Serviteurs”, cit.

25 It was Coppolani who gave the name Mauritania to the Bilad ash-Shingit, the central region of Adrar; the name was later applied to all the northern territories of the Senegal River Valley. ANS, AOF/O/591, “Esquisse géographique...” cit..

26 Cfr. ANS, AOF/9G/79, report, Commissioner Charles Mouret to the General Governor, Saint-Louis, 23 November 1912.

27 Cfr. ANS, AOF/O/591, “Esquisse géographique...” cit.

28 ANS, AOF/K/24, decree of the French president, Paris, 12 December 1905 (copy attached to letter from the Minister of Colonies to the AOF General Governor, 22 December 1905).

29 ANS, AOF/2K/1, reports for 1922, 1923, 1924 and 1925 on the Colony of Mauritania for the AOF Governor.

30 E.g. ANS, AOF/2K/5, several documents.

piracy. In Hodh and Tagant, Hunkarin denounced the existence of slavery within Moorish society and the collusion of French officials with Arab masters.

Although no real emancipation measures were adopted during the period of French occupation (Bullard 2016, p. 244), colonial economic policies pushed masters to free male slaves³¹ (McDougall 2007, p. 240) as a condition of being able to trade or work with the French; slaves who emancipated became *Haratin*³² (McDougall 1989, p. 382). Others fled to the South and sometimes entered new forms of dependence, as with the Peul people of the River Valley (Leservoisièr 2000, pp. 150-153). In other cases, the reorganization of the colonial administration indirectly facilitated emancipation, as with the creation in 1948 of new borders between Mauritania and French Sudan (Mali), which enabled some *Haratin* groups to be registered in Mali in order to weaken their dependence on their Mauritanian masters³³.

Anti-slavery movements: an overview

After Mauritania gained its independence (1960), it signed the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1961) condemning slavery but failed to promote clear emancipation policies. Newsletters distributed by the Minister of Justice in 1966-69 condemned the practice of slavery but also warned against an abrupt suppression of the relations between masters and slaves (Messaoud 2000, pp. 293-294). While anti-slavery protests had already appeared in 1969-1973³⁴, it was the creation of El-Hor (“Free Man”³⁵) in 1978 that marked the emergence of a *Haratin* movement.

The educated members of the *Haratin* élite established El-Hor on 5 March 1978. Among its best-known leaders were Messaoud Ould Boulkheir (a civil servant), Boubacar Ould Messaoud (an architect), Mohamed Ould Haimer (a primary-school teacher), Boydiel Ould Houmeid and Achour Ould Samba (who would later be civil servants) and Mohamed Lemine Ould Ahmed and El Kel Ould Mohamed El ‘abd (who would become academics) (Z. Ould Ahmed Salem 2009, p. 161).

31 McDougall highlights the role of gender and reminds us how female slaves ensured the reproduction of the slaves (McDougall 2015, p. 254).

32 In Hassaniyya, *Haratin* descendants from ancient freed slaves were named “khadara” or “khadari”, more rarely even “khourth” (Ould Saleck 2000, p. 256).

33 ANS, AOF/2K/15, letter from the administrator of the *cercle* of Nioro to the French Sudan Governor, Nioro, 6 April 1958, and letter from the French Sudan Governor to the AOF General Governor, Bamako, 25 April 1948.

34 See note 9.

35 Ould Saleck (2003, p. 62) asserts that the movement was also known as “Akhike el-Hartani” (“your brother Hartani”), probably in reference to the opening words of the El-Hor Charter.

Importantly, Mohamed Yahya Ould Cirée, an El-Hor member at the time, claimed that El-Hor had been created clandestinely in November 1974 at the ENA, the Mauritanian National School for Administration, and that they devoted the first four years to raising awareness among *Haratin*, students and civil servants. Ould Cirée³⁶ also reported that El-Hor organized itself as a movement after the Choggar uprising (1977), during which masters and slaves fought over tax increases, and which brought it public visibility (Ould Cirée 2005, p. 51). Remarkably, El-Hor, in fighting for the rights of the *Haratin*, claimed that they possessed “cultural specificity” and that they belonged to both the black-African world and the Arab-Berber world³⁷.

El Hor was a *Haratin* party that asserted that those still in slavery should aim to become *Haratin*; in this sense – in the context of *bidan* society – it was abolitionist. But in the context of Mauritania, the nation, it represented a particular group of former slaves and slaves “released” from direct familial control. It was not a national abolitionist movement (McDougall 2010, p. 261).

“The demand for a fight against slavery was made in the name of the egalitarian vocation of Islam and against the distorted use of religion to legitimate slavery”³⁸ (Maimone 2013, p. 161). El-Hor pressed the Government to promote an egalitarian society, and, as part of the “consolidation of the national unity”³⁹ to “dispel the myth” that defined the *Haratin* as inferior. As Ould Ahmed Salem noted (2009, p. 163), “El-Hor intended less to overturn Mauritania’s power structures or society and more to become a fully-fledged, active part of it. The *Haratin* movement did not develop a radical or revolutionary vision”.

In February 1980⁴⁰, eighteen of El-Hor’s members were prosecuted following demonstrations about a case in which a young woman in Atar was sold⁴¹. The great societal resonance of the “trial of Rosso” (the city where it took place) contributed to El-Hor’s growing popularity and captured the attention of the Anti-Slavery Society⁴². Protests all over the country

36 He later abandoned the movement, polemically. He also argues that Messaoud Ould Boulkheir—who would become the leader of El-Hor—joined El-Hor later than 1974 and therefore should not be regarded as a “founding member”.

37 See El-Hor’s “Charte Constitutive” in *L’Ouest Saharien*, 4, 2004, pp. 183-188.

38 Biram Dah Abeid would later reclaim this “egalitarian vocation of Islam” invoked by El-Hor by making it part of IRA’s ideology. Even the public burning of the Maliki books in 2012 that caused Abeid a lot of criticisms was justified on the basis that the books were completely opposed to the precepts of “pure” Islam (Maimone 2016, pp. 232-233).

39 El-Hor’s “Charte Constitutive”, cit.

40 A dispute arose between a *Haratin* lieutenant who intended to marry her and two Beydan who wished to buy her (Cotton 1998, p. 30).

41 Mercer (1982, pp. 10-11) reminds us that the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmed Ould Abdallah—whose mother was *Haratin*—was arrested, accused of having supported the protesters.

42 The organization became Anti-Slavery International in 1990.

pushed President Haidallah⁴³ to adopt decree N. 81,324 on 8 November 1981, which stated that “slavery in all its form is permanently abolished” in Mauritania. Slaves/*‘abid* were officially freed and became *Haratin*, but the government never developed emancipation policies to protect them, nor were the economic resources stipulated by the decree allocated to compensate masters for their losses⁴⁴. “Les autorités en tout cas ne sont pas allées jusqu’au bout de leur promesse et aucun recensement officiel des individus ‘à racheter’ n’a été officiellement versées” (Ould Cheikh 2004, p. 291). Since a pecuniary compensation is essential for a true “transfer of ownership” in an Islamic society like Mauritania, the socio-cultural chains keeping former slaves dependent on their former masters remained in place. A land reform granting the *Haratin* the right to claim ownership of the lands they cultivated was announced in 1983 (Ruf 2000, p. 243). However, because the reform, promulgated by the El-Hor leader Ould Boulkheir, left much jurisdictional initiative in the hands of prefects and local chiefs, most of the lands in question were assigned not to black Mauritians but to civil servants and traders of Nouakchott (Chiari 1990, pp. 548-549).

The most conservative section of Beydan society regarded the 1981 abolition as temporary, doomed to disappear with the fall of its promoter, and used the term “Haidalla’s *Haratin*” (Ould Saleck 2003, p. 79). Subsequent governments typically contained one or two *Haratin* ministers chosen from within El-Hor⁴⁵, whose claims and protests had paved the way for the 1981 abolitionist decree, but the existing social order was maintained, and the presence of *Haratin* ministers did not directly lead to significant improvements in the socio-economic conditions of the poorest *Haratin*. Other factors such as social and environmental dynamics – including growing desertification⁴⁶, rapid urbanization⁴⁷ and military conscription⁴⁸ – have

43 President Mokhtar Ould Daddah had been overthrown by a group of military officers on 10 July 1980.

44 “Cette abolition donnera lieu à une compensation au profit des ayants droit” (quoted in Ramdan 2007, p. 216).

45 The support for Ould Taya—president from 1984—and disputes among the El-Hor members about the political nature of the movement and of the fight against slavery (Ould Ahmed Salem 2009, 168) brought divisions within El-Hor, especially after the move to a multiparty system in 1990-1 (Badael 1994, p. 97).

46 A severe drought afflicted Mauritania in the 1970s, impoverishing the Arab tribes of the Northern rural areas (Ruf 2000, pp. 240-244). Many *Haratin* fled to Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, or into southern towns such as Boutilimit and Rosso (McDougall 2015, p. 255).

47 In particular, the population of Nouakchott rose from 40,000 in the 1970s to 200,000 in the 1980s. *Haratin* constituted 35% of the population of the *kebbes* (“shanty-towns”) (Tanguy-Destremau 2012, p. 261).

48 Arguably, a large proportion of the 18,000 soldiers used in the Western Sahara War were *Haratin*. Moreover, McDougall (2005, pp. 962-963) analysed how the Western Sahara War (1975-78) and the fact that the Arab-Berber members of the Polisario treated

contributed to improving the socio-economic conditions of some *Haratin* while others have remained in relationships of dependence on their former masters.

In 1995 Boubarcar Messaoud, previously an El-Hor⁴⁹ member, established *SOS Esclaves*, an organization devoted to the liberation of the victims of slavery and to their social reintegration into Mauritanian society. As “keeping women as slaves meant keeping the means to reproduce the labour force” (McDougall 2005, p. 961), *SOS Esclaves* countered the gendered dimension of slavery by opening a technical school for women to provide education and professional training.

The popularity of *SOS Esclaves* rose after the French television channel FR3 broadcast a documentary about slavery in Mauritania, in which Messaoud presented slaves to the cameras. He was arrested and sentenced to thirteen months imprisonment (Ould Ahmed Salem 2009, p. 174) but he was released before the end of his sentence. His collaboration with Western NGOs and associations further increased *SOS Esclaves*’ popularity, although “using the international community to fight a domestic battle can be problematic: once in the public domain, *SOS Esclaves* could not control how the information it provided was used: by whom, where or for what purposes” (McDougall 2010, p. 269).

Biram Dah Abeid, himself a *SOS Esclaves*⁵⁰ member in 2002, was able to maintain the international collaboration and extend the audience developed by *SOS Esclaves* when he established IRA Mauritanie in 2008. Dah Abeid too was arrested several times, spending nearly eighteen months in prison in 2014 but he continued to collaborate with Messaoud and other anti-slavery activists on the 2013 *Haratin* manifesto, which I discuss below.

IRA Mauritanie: the making of the Haratin identity

The “Manifesto for the political, economic, and social rights of the *Haratin*”⁵¹ thoroughly analyzes the miserable conditions suffered by the *Haratin* and outlines a set of programmatic guidelines to allow them to reach full

Haratin prisoners more harshly than Mauritanian Arab-Berbers raised awareness among the *Haratin* that the Beydanes assigned them an inferior status.

49 McDougall (2010, p. 267) observes how Messaoud’s career had taken a different path after the loss of his position in government for signing an open letter to the government after the 1990 municipal elections, which El-Hor believed had been undermined by the authorities.

50 I discuss some elements of *SOS Esclaves* and El-Hor in detail later on.

51 The full title is “Manifeste pour les droits politiques, économiques et sociaux des *Haratines* au sein d’une Mauritanie unie, égalitaire et réconciliée avec elle-même”, but it is also known as the “Manifeste du 29 avril”.

equality. According to the Manifesto, the marginalization of the *Haratin* is caused by their unequal access to land, their lack of education, their exclusion from public offices and the insurmountable difficulties they face in obtaining bank loans or work licenses, for example in the fishing sector. This is a toxic combination of factors which prevents most *Haratin* from achieving economic independence and contributes to their enduring dependence on their former masters. Although the *Haratin* are the “principal and increasingly significant component of the Mauritanian people”⁵², these conditions have made them a minority group. As Martin argues,

minority status within a society is not necessarily determined by relative size; indeed, it is a common mistake to think of minorities always as small groups differentiated within larger groups. [...] *Minority status* often involves some form of exclusion from the dominant society or assignment to a lower status in one or more of four areas of life: (1) economic, (2) political, (3) legal, and/or (4) social-associational (Martin 2005, pp. 12-13).

As the biggest group in the country, their supposed inclusion within either the Arab-Berber community or that of black-Mauritanians has clear political connotations. This is especially important for Arabs, who control most of the country’s economic resources. By including *Haratin* within their community they would legitimize both themselves as a majority and the current distribution of power that clearly favours Beydan.

As Biram Dah Abeid declared: “They (Arabs, ed.) define the identity of the *Haratin* without asking the *Haratin*. They declare that the *Haratin* are Arabs to grow their own numbers to the detriment of blacks, to reduce the number of blacks, to exclude blacks”⁵³. This is a key point. According to IRA Mauritanie, after having exploited *Haratin* as slaves, the Arabs are now trying to ally with them by highlighting their affinities against the black-Mauritanians. In contrast, IRA Mauritanie strongly opposes the assimilation of *Haratin* with Arabs-Berbers and calls into question the forced, fictive nature of this process of inclusion. Due to their enslavement, *Haratin* were forcibly assimilated into Arab society, and this, for IRA activists, made their identity “African, Arab, and Berber, forged with pain by oppression”⁵⁴. Bringing to the fore the painful dynamics of the enslavement and the cultural assimilation imposed on the *Haratin*, IRA resignifies slavery and its

52 *Ibidem.*

53 Interview with Biram Dah Abeid, Naples, 8 November 2012. All interviews with Biram Dah Abeid were conducted in French. Translation from French by the present author.

54 Cfr. Statement 5 August 2013 of the Executive Board of the RAG Party (cfr. <http://bawosophma.wordpress.com/2013/08/06/en-mauritanie-seuls-les-partis-maures-sont-desormais-autorises/>, visited 15 January 2014). RAG was a party created by IRA Mauritanie in mid-2013 but outlawed by the Mauritanian Government and then dissolved.

legacies from simple elements of discrimination and social stigma to the keystones of the *Haratin* community's act of self-identification. By doing so, Biram Dah Abeid and IRA Mauritanie also hope to trigger moves towards the recovery of their origin. For Dah Abeid, indeed, the *Haratin* are "black autochthones"⁵⁵, and thus their claims of equality and full citizenship are legitimate. For IRA, blackness is a key component of the *Haratin* identity and the *Haratin* form a community that is different from the black-Mauritanian ones. However, the factors that differentiate the *Haratin* from the Arabs-Berbers and the black-Mauritanians are different, insofar as the *Haratin* are "black-African for their origin and *direct* cousins of black-Africans; Arabs of Mauritania for culture and then cousins of white Moors" (Bilal Ramdane 2010⁵⁶, emphasis in original). In this way, IRA combines slave legacies and ethnic origin into claims of ethnic autonomy.

In an interview, Biram Dah Abeid articulated this crucial point as follows:

They (the Moors) are different from us because we have acquired a status, an identity that belongs to us alone, which is built on centuries of history and in the endurance of extreme human suffering. So our identity is a *Haratin* identity independent of both the Moors – that is to say, the Arab-Berbers – and the black-Mauritanians of all combined nationalities. [...] IRA – and this is precisely what makes IRA different from all other *Haratin* movements – refuses this identity imposed by political decree. We consider that identity cannot be imposed by political decree, that our identity is antithetical to Arabness which in Mauritania is invoked only to justify the racist people, to justify slavery⁵⁷.

This third-party position has two more implications. First, it rejects the attempt by both the Arabs-Berbers and the black-Mauritanians to include the *Haratin* within an existing community, so as to reinforce one to the detriment of the other (Botte 2000, p. 26). Second, it is a refusal to be part of either of two communities that are both characterized by a slave past. On the one hand, the Arabs had slaves who are now formally free but still in dependence. On the other hand black-Mauritanians (Wolof, Soninké, etc) also had their own slaves, whose descendants are nowadays excluded from some social practices (Kamara 2000, p. 285). In this way, Dah Abeid suggests a shorter distance between *Haratin* and black-Mauritanian communities: among them "slavery has different parameters. It is a *castification*,

55 "Autochtones noires", <http://www.lecalame.info/interviews/item/1158-trois-questions-%C3%A0-biram-dah-abeid-pr%C3%A9sident-de-l%E2%80%99initiative-de-r%C3%A9urgence-du-mouvement-abolitionniste-ira-en-mauritanie> (accessed: 15 January 2014).

56 At that time he still was an IRA leader.

57 Interview with Biram Dah Abeid, Naples, 8 November 2012.

there are no economic parameters as among Moors⁵⁸. For him, the exploitation of the *Haratin* by the Arabs-Berbers rests on ethnic reasons: the “white” leading class of *bidan* exploit the “black” *Haratin*, the *sudan*, the poorest in the country. Thus, while working within an antislavery tradition in Mauritania, IRA Mauritanie has not only embraced antiracism but also combined the fight for the rights of the *Haratin* with the struggle against the racism suffered by both *Haratin* and black-Mauritians. To achieve this, Dah Abeid claimed that the fight against slavery is an economic fight, that of the poorest against the richest. Since they were slaves on the lowest rung of the social ladder, the end of slavery should imply the end of the exploitation of all oppressed Mauritians.

This goal reflects Dah Abeid’s wish to become the spokesman of all the marginalized Mauritians by pointing to their alleged “blackness”. In this regard, it is worth recalling that FLAM (*Forces de libération africaines de Mauritanie*) – the black-Mauritanian radical movement born in 1983 from the fusion of several minor groups – was declared illegal by 1984. In 1986, after the publication of the “Manifesto of the oppressed black-Mauritanian” – a political denunciation of the racist policies of the Arab ruling class – two thirds of its leadership were arrested and other leaders were exiled in Dakar and later in Paris. As a consequence, the black-Mauritians had been “orphans” of a political, “racially-oriented” movement for almost three decades⁵⁹. To fill this gap, Biram Dah Abeid has strengthened IRA’s cooperation with several black-Mauritanian organizations and has promoted demonstrations denouncing the communal marginalization and violence suffered by both social groups.

Special significance is attached to the pilgrimages to the sites where black-Mauritians were massacred during ethnic cleansing in 1990-91. Those years, indeed, marked a turning point in the recent history of Mauritania: about 80,000-100,000 black-Mauritians⁶⁰ were expelled to Senegal and Mali because they had no documents and so could not prove their Mauritanian citizenship. Clashes also occurred between black-Mauritians and *Haratin* and on some occasions the *Haratin* participated in looting and massacres carried out against black-Mauritians (Ould Cheikh 2004, p. 296). At that time the *Haratin* were used as a sort of civil army to push black-Mauritians out of their villages and lands⁶¹, and this wound divided

58 *Ibidem.*

59 FLAM leaders were allowed to return to Mauritania only in 2013.

60 Some scholars reports about 70,000-80,000 expulsions, the UNHCR said 66,000 (Tamburini 2010, p. 271), while others claim a higher number, up to 120,000 (Fresia 2009, p. 46), because of the “porosity” of the borders and of the kinships between people living on either side of the Senegal River (Kane 2010, p. 290).

61 Diallo states that the *Haratin* were used as a re-elaborated version of “slave armies”, in continuity with the ancient tradition of using warrior slaves (2005, pp. 82-83).

Mauritanian society for a long time. As Dah Abeid aspires to become the leader of all Mauritians, he must, and indeed is trying, to reconcile the *Haratin* and the black-Mauritians.

IRA Mauritanie, therefore, stresses its desire to be a national movement, not specifically related to a single community nor merely ethnic-oriented. This is one of the new strategies recently followed by IRA Mauritanie, with both the internationalization of the anti-slavery struggle and the construction of a national network of supporters. These new strategies⁶² emerged forcefully after 2012, when the public burning of some legal texts by Dah Abeid brought with it on the one hand accusations of blasphemy and the threat of death penalty but on the other hand large public demonstrations in his support. Some months later, IRA Mauritanie organized a number of Slaves' Marches (or "Freedom Caravans"⁶³) throughout the country, which not only increased Dah Abeid's popularity but also multiplied the numbers of IRA members, from 800 to 10,000⁶⁴.

Blackness and the *Haratin*

The fact that Dah Abeid both associates *Haratin* with other black-Mauritians and distinguishes them from them, depending on the issue at stake, may convey a sense of ambiguity around both the alleged blackness of the *Haratin* and his "instrumental" use of racial differences. This should not be surprising as "in West Africa and elsewhere, race is an abstraction and a form of argument; it is used for specific and concrete reasons to do particular kinds of social and political work" (Hall 2011, p. 22). Referring to *Haratin*, Leservoisier wrote that their claims of black identity are intended primarily to underline their differences from the *Beydan* and not to identify themselves with the black-Mauritians. The *Haratin* use their black African origin as the primary marker of difference from Arabs, as an element that characterizes their identity along with music, dance, and songs. As Leservoisier has argued:

It thus becomes clear that the claims to "black" identity voiced by *haratin* refer to an "invented tradition" in Hobsbawm's (1983) sense: its historical

Other scholars saw in the behaviour of the *Haratin* a proof of their continued dependence on their former Arab masters (e.g. Ould Saleck 2000, p. 258), who would use them to take possess of the fertile lands of the Senegal River Valley.

62 They are wider analysed in Maimone 2015, pp. 199-216.

63 The first "Caravane de la liberté" took place from 24 to 28 January 2013 and touched Southern cities like Néma, Aleg, Boutilimit, and Kiffa. Other marches followed hereafter.

64 Interview with Biram Dah Abeid, Leiden, 11 April 2017.

continuity is fictional, and it is turned toward new objectives that are alien to the tradition itself. Anthropologists have to be particularly careful not to analyse the history of social groups by projecting onto them ethnic or racial identity categories that have emerged only recently. [...] Many *haratin* publicly assert their difference from the Moors, claiming that they are “Moors but black, black but Moors” and that “their culture will never destroy their race, nor will their race ever destroy their culture” (2012, pp. 157-158).

We agree with this analysis but we also raise some critical points. First, the claimed historical continuity between the enslaved black-Africans, the “black Moors” and the free *Haratin* is not necessarily fictional. The *Haratin* identity has acquired Arab-Berber elements while maintaining some black-African elements (N’Gaïde 2007-08, pp. 3-7) and, of course, slaves were not free in the past to claim *any* identity, black or not. Secondly, Leservoiser’s words also suggest how analyses can be affected by the question of which *Haratin* we are referring to. For example, some scholars have focused on rich and popular *Haratin* like Messaoud Ould Boulkheir⁶⁵ or Mohamed Said Ould Hamody⁶⁶, who have both affirmed that *Haratin* were black Moors. Opinions about the “blackness” of *Haratin* differ between the young *Haratin* living in the *kebbes* of Nouackhott⁶⁷, where ethnic barriers between them and the black-Mauritanians seem minimal, and the *Haratin* living in the niche-settlement of Tevragh Zeina (McDougall 2015, pp. 271-278). This is to say that opinions about the blackness of *Haratin*, and the multiple representations of the *Haratin* identity, vary greatly with age, socioeconomic background, space and time.

Thirdly, we understand but do not share Leservoiser’s advice to be careful in analyzing elements of the *Haratin* identity – like blackness – given its recent emergence. In every society, the continuous “creating and recreating of an ethnic identity” (Nagel 1994, p. 152) makes identities “fluid” in Bauman’s sense, not fixed. Moreover, in urban spaces like the Mauritanian shantytowns, where ethnic separations between the *Haratin* and the black-Mauritanians coexist with forms of solidarity and “community feelings” in which communal racial connotations play a key role⁶⁸, ethnic identities are continuously created and recreated.

65 To whom the sentence “Moors but blacks, blacks but Moors” is usually attributed. Dah Abeid states, however, that it originated with a friend of Ould Boulkheir, Amadou Lyale (transcription could be wrong, N.d.A.).

66 Important political figure and well-renowned intellectual, son of a *bartani* who became rich during colonial time and became a slaver himself. He died in 2015.

67 Interviews carried out in February-March 2013 in El-Mina, Sebkha, Arafat, and Riyadh, districts of Nouackhott where mostly black-Mauritanians and *Haratin* live in.

68 This also emerged recently in other districts of Nouackhott, like Riyadh and Arafat. For example in June 2016, when black-Mauritanian squatters were expelled by force by Mauritanian police, *Haratin* defended them.

Some anthropological studies on the *Haratin* report that elements of separate identity were present in cultural expression such as music and dance (Leservoisier 2012, p. 157), usually performed by slaves for their masters. In particular, *medh* (sacred songs) and *redh* (dance performed by singing and playing) have been considered examples of an emerging culture, as gospel songs were to American slaves, namely as a way to break the chains of the cultural slavery suffered by the *Haratin* (N'Gaïde 2007-08, p. 2-4). Moreover, *medh* also expressed political messages, some of which contained Maoist sentiments (Ruf 2000, p. 244).

In general, however, scholars have failed to clarify the question of whether it is more appropriate to categorize the *Haratin* as a group⁶⁹ part of the Moorish community or not, or as “black Moors”. This practice seems to be a colonial relic, an attempt to analyze current times by using past categories that are evidently unfit to describe the present. This recalls the first colonizers who were incapable of analyzing the dynamics existing within Moorish society and who then operated social distinctions only by emphasizing racial differences, “in part because they corresponded to European denigrations of people defined as black” (Hall 2011, p. 2). “Black Moors” has no equivalent in Hassaniyya, the local Arabic dialect, nor in other black-Mauritanian languages. In the Moorish society there are *bidan* and *sudan* and both terms have precise social connotations – as shown above – while the term “Moors” (or French “Maures”) is used by both the categories just to distinguish one group from the other⁷⁰.

As Dah Abeid states, “Black Moors do not exist! There are *Haratin* and Moors. It is Moors who describe themselves as ‘White Moors’. It is not our problem...”⁷¹. Dah Abeid’s polemical vein has polarized Mauritanian public opinion, by setting heartfelt supporters against fierce critics⁷². Two of the main criticisms are that his claims are divisive and menace the unity of the country and that highlighting racial connotations for *Haratin* will reinforce discrimination based on cultural differences within Mauritanian communities. It is worth noting that the blackness of the *Haratin* was a justification for their enslavement despite their being Muslim (Ruf 1999, p. 9) and that it justified a “chromatic demonization” that attached stigmas

69 A discussion of the ambiguity surrounding the use of terms “group” and “social group” instead of “community” or “ethnicity”, albeit pertinent, is beyond the scope of this article.

70 Dozens of interviews I conducted with *Haratin*, Beydan, and black-Mauritanians in Mauritania (February-March 2013), and within the Mauritanian diaspora in Paris (2012-13, and 2015-16).

71 Interview with Biram Dah Abeid, Naples, 8 November 2012.

72 Many came from local imams and preachers, who attacked Dah Abeid during their sermons in the Mosques.

and subhuman connotations to the word *Haratin*, as this rhyme, popular among Arab children, shows:

Haratin are grandchildren of devils. / They received the colour of cockroaches / and the smell of goats. / If hungry, they steal. / If they eat, they bloat (*Haratin* baratine / Oulad a'm cheyatines / Jabou lek hal mene le khnaviss / Jabou le khneuz meun le'tariss / La kalou yeu balgou / La ja'ou yeu sargou)⁷³.

IRA Mauritanie between inspiration and innovation

The organization created by Biram Dah Abeid is new in both structure⁷⁴ and ideology, is deeply politicized and has achieved ever greater popularity. In renewing the Mauritanian anti-slavery struggle, however, he has drawn on pre-existing experiences and ideologies; even the alleged separate identity and blackness of the *Haratin* are not recent matters, and previous movements fighting marginalization and slavery in Mauritania made similar claims of “ethnic autonomy”.

From its foundation in 1978, El-Hor asserted that the *Haratin's* “cultural specificity”⁷⁵ consisted in their belonging both to the black African world, from which they came, and to the Arab world, by “adoption”. Internal differences between the founders of El-Hor became clearer in the years following its establishment. The idea of a *Haratin* cultural specificity is upheld by Ould Cirée, who worked for the Mauritanian diplomatic service and then moved to Paris where he created AHME, the Association of the *Haratin* of Mauritania in Europe. Although AHME is not big it has conducted some notable campaigns, such as the publication of the journal “Le cri du Hartani” and the distribution of lists of slavers and “collaborationists”. He explicitly claimed to have left Mauritania because of his refusal to serve the “racist and slavery system directed by Ould Taya”. He claimed a separate identity for *Haratin*:

The Mauritanian State considers that *Haratin* are Arabs. Arab nationalists (Ba'athist and Nasserist) too. The position of the El-Hor leaders [...] is even more astonishing because they assert that *Haratin* are Arabs. This argument is not defensible. *Haratin* did not choose the Arab culture, which was im-

73 A.H.M.E., “Communiqué 115”, <http://www.Haratine.com/Site/ancien/communique185.htm> (accessed in May 2020).

74 IRA established headquarters in the cities and in the major villages, as well as an international network connecting with both the Mauritanian diaspora – with branches in the US, Canada, and some European countries (Italy, Spain, France, Belgium, Netherlands) – and foreigners.

75 El-Hor Chart.

posed upon them by force, through slavery. Deracinated from their original social (ethnic) environment, the *Haratin* have been forced to learn Hassaniyya, which is different from Arabic. [...] If language defines Arabness, then all those who speak Arabic would be Arabs. [...] We know that is not true. [...] Thus, *Haratin* are Mauriticians, but they are not Arabs. [...] To me, the *Haratin* are a separate component, one that must free itself from the other two groups (Ould Cirée 2005, p. 67, my translation).

Crucially, the discussion about the separate identity of the *Haratin* is some decades old. A public debate about its possible emergence began in Mauritania in March 1994, with a special supplement of the political magazine *Espaces Calame*. One of its articles was dedicated to those *Haratin* who were investigating the “slave culture”, and asked if there was a separate “*Haratin* consciousness” (McDougall 2013). The monthly newspaper “was devoted to the *haratin* issue. Articles highlighted the political dilemma as well as the social ambiguity associated with slaves, *haratin* and El-Hor” (McDougall 2010, p. 268). It was becoming clear that to claim a separate identity for the biggest demographic group of the country would have great socio-political significance. Ten years before this the FLAM manifesto had claimed the existence of “two racial communities: a black one, to which the *Haratin* belong, and an Arab one⁷⁶”. Through the inclusion of *Haratin* within a unified black community, the FLAM highlighted the fact that Arabs were a minority in a country with a black majority and that Arabs discriminated against the latter on racial grounds. These examples clearly indicate that IRA Mauritanie has assimilated elements of previous programmes of Mauritanian movements, and have renewed the anti-slavery struggle by the insertion of a wider, innovative strategy of sending down roots both in the country and outside. While IRA has added a major emphasis on the racial dimension of slavery, its main declared goal remains the fight against slavery and the marginalization afflicting the *Haratin*, a fight that – according to IRA – can be carried out only by affirming full (economic, social, political, and also cultural) autonomy for the *Haratin*.

As mentioned above, this demand for autonomy was present in the 2013 *Haratin* Manifesto to which Dah Abeid subscribed while making some criticisms. Among other things, the 2013 Manifesto states that inequalities caused a social separation of the Moors into “two entities more and more distinguished (Beydan, on the one hand, and *Haratin*, on the other hand)⁷⁷” and that the latter form a “socio-ethnic category”. This point marked one of

76 FLAM, *Le Manifeste du Nègro-Mauritanien opprimé*, 1986, http://www.flamnet.info/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=90%3Ale-manifeste-du-negro-Mauritanien-oppri-me-fevrier-1966-avril-1986-&catid=37%3Apublications&Itemid=1 (accessed: 15 January 2018).

77 *Manifeste pour les droits...* See also note 8.

the major disagreements between Dah Abeid and other *Haratin* leaders who signed the Manifesto, with Dah Abeid criticizing the document's statement that the *Haratin* were initially part of an originally unitary Moorish community, from which they became differentiated because of their marginalization. In contrast, Dah Abeid emphasizes that the constant presence over time of marginalization and discrimination in the relationships between *Haratin* and Arabs means that the two of them never, in effect, formed a single community.

Including the *Haratin* within the Arab community of Mauritania, is – given our plural identity, which is at the same time African, Arab-Berber and Islamic [...] – an insult and an infamy: it reduces us to an appearance within the history of masters, to an appendix of their anthropology. Hartani and Beydan refer to two different, opposed destinies, that only perfect equality one day will conciliate⁷⁸.

Full equality for the *Haratin* is, then, still as yet unachieved. Dah Abeid attempted to reach this goal by entering the political arena as a presidential candidate in the 2014 election. Although he was a distant second – with 8.67% of the vote against 81.89% for Abdel Aziz – he gained legitimacy as a competitor with Abdel Aziz and as a major *Haratin* political leader, at the expense of Messaoud Ould Boulkheir⁷⁹, who lost the presidency of the National Assembly in 2013. The *Haratin* cause now relies increasingly on Dah Abeid, who was arrested in November 2014 for an unauthorized demonstration and released only in April 2016, following international protests. During his detention repression against IRA Mauritanie had increased harshly: every demonstration brought arrests of IRA members who were given severe sentences, confirming, for Dah Abeid, Abdel Aziz' aim of isolating and weakening him⁸⁰. Dah Abeid made a similar accusation after his arrest on the first day of the electoral campaign for the 2018 legislative election. He was arrested on 7 August 2018 after a complaint about a threat to a journalist and released four months later. While in prison, Dah Abeid has been elected to the National Assembly after an electoral alliance between

78 Author's translation. In "Entretien/Birame : Le document a été détourné par les groupes dominants ", *Taqadoumy*, 21 July 2013, http://taqadoumy.com/fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3390:entretien-birame-l-le-document-a-ete-detourne-par-les-groupes-dominantsr&catid=83:interviews&Itemid=460 (accessed: 5 February 2014).

79 Being 75, he is no longer eligible for the presidential elections, despite its attempts to modify the article of the Constitution on this point.

80 Interview with Biram Dah Abeid, Rome, 26 November 2016.

IRA Mauritanie and the Sawab Party⁸¹ and came second with 18.58% of the votes in the 2019 presidential elections.

Conclusion

Emphasizing the political dimension of his activism brought Dah Abeid severe criticisms from his detractors, who accused him of using the fight against slavery as a tool to acquire personal power. Even the international awards given to IRA Mauritanie are regarded by Dah Abeid's opponents as proof of its president's divisive purpose⁸² and search for fame. Unquestionably, IRA Mauritanie has been able to make – or, according to its opponents, has been guilty of making – slavery and the marginalization of the *Haratin* an internationally prominent issue to an unprecedented degree. As I have tried to show in this article, when we deal with *Haratin* in Mauritania we need a historical approach to highlight the diachronic transformation undergone by the people we are referring to. Nowadays we see in Mauritania the persistence of previous practices of exploitation that are incomparable in any major way with other modern forms of slavery⁸³. Moreover, when some *Haratin* present themselves as a separate community, the issue of slavery in Mauritania becomes closely associated with socio-political and economic demands that go beyond the anti-slavery campaigns, extending into requests for radical social transformations that call into question the anthropological categories of identity and community.

IRA Mauritanie added – or, more precisely, retrieved – “blackness” as a useful racial category for combining legacies of slavery. These legacies have in Mauritania a clear racial connotation with the marginalization still suffered by both the *Haratin* and black-Mauritanians, and they are in turn related to racial factors. However, as I have argued in this article, this is just one of the many aspects that IRA has recovered from the ideologies and experiences of the previous Mauritanian anti-slavery movements. The blackness that IRA claims for the *Haratin* is not the only element that defines their identity. More important is the claim that the *Haratin* should be

81 Dah Abeid was criticized for this alliance, especially from the Halpulaaren who highlighted how Sawab was a Ba'athist and Arab-nationalistic party whose leader supported the Ould Taya's persecutions against black-Mauritanians in 1989-91. Despite of this criticism by a part of the black community, IRA was able to elect two deputies, Dah Abeid and Coumba Dado Kane, and members in local councils.

82 E.g. the Mufti of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania stated that the 2013 UN Prize was assigned to Abeid after Zionist pressure to divide the country.

83 The term is usually used with reference to bonded labour, forced labour, human trafficking, forced marriage, child labour, sexual slavery, and other “forms of not free work” (Moulier-Boutang 2005, p. 1069).

considered a separate community. Although this claim is not unanimously made by all *Haratin*, scholars are obliged, by the importance it has acquired within Mauritanian society and by its socio-political implications, to deal with it.

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