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**Former Slaves Becoming Imams
Citizenship, Islam
and Ethnicity in Contemporary Mauritania**

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In February 2010, a group of nearly twenty imams of slave descent (*haratin*)¹ decided to set up a meeting with Birame Ould Abeid, President of an anti-slavery NGO called *Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste en Mauritanie* (IRA). The visitors who ultimately gathered in the house of the activist did not resemble its usual clients. Indeed, they were not runaway slaves coming from the country side seeking help in the Capital, nor were they victims of human rights abuses. The imams were not asking for IRA's intervention to advocate or help to settle a dispute over land ownership or child abuse or unpaid work. These were in fact well-established imams, and as such had an enjoyable financial and social situation compared to average impoverished *haratin* people. However, most of them had first-hand experience of slavery in their childhood and youth and as such had come quite a long way before ending up, against all odds, as imams. The purpose of their visit was to share the rather difficult story of their incredible achievements and, above all, to stress the fact they were still more or less marginalized among the community of free-born imams of *bizan* (white Moors) background. They claimed that even though they were officially approved and paid by the State Administration in charge of Islamic Affairs, most of their White-Arab peers along with the State itself tend to marginalize them and discriminate against them in many ways. The *haratin* imams insisted also that if slavery persisted in Mauritania, it was mainly because all the national religious figures were reluctant to denounce its role in the country: some Islamic scholars would even take for granted the Islamic lawfulness of the institution and therefore the practice of slavery. According to the statement made that day by the group of *haratin* imams, the key evidence of the complicity of the mainstream 'ulema with the practice of slavery in Mauritania was their general unwillingness to issue fatwas stating clearly and unambiguously that slavery is not allowed by the *sharia*. Finally, the *haratin* imams wanted to confirm their full support to the discourse of IRA and its president, noting that they were the first figures within the entire and diverse antislavery movement to highlight the illegal and immoral religious legitimization of slavery by the ulema and the Islamic establishment in the Country.

¹ *Haratin* (sing. *hartani*) means originally 'manumitted slave'. It is increasingly used for the Arabic-speaking Black people regardless of their origin or status. The word '*abd*' (slave) is often used as well.

The day after this meeting, some of the imams held a press conference to reiterate their discourse and to confirm that their colleagues as well as other `ulema should clearly break their silence on the persistence of slavery and its vestiges in Mauritania. They pointed out the fact that they have themselves suffered from bondage and that many peoples still suffer from it in the country despite the official state of denial. The very same day, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs took some decisive actions. During meetings quickly organised and held in the premises of the Ministry in presence of the haratin imams, the Government representatives including the Minister himself, stated clearly that the State does not allow them to raise such an issue nor to get involved in human rights advocacy. The following Friday, all the imams in Nouakchott mosques were instructed for the first time ever in Mauritania to read during the communal prayer a standardized sermon denouncing not only IRA and its President but also anyone from the Islamic sphere willing to work with them. The keyword *fitna*—discord—featured many times in that sermon. However, very few imams from the haratin community agreed to read the government sponsored text. The group of haratin imams that held the press conference pressed all their colleagues to address instead in their sermons the issue of slavery and its persistence not to mention its Islamic illegality. The political aftermath and consequences of these events are worth mentioning: the IRA leader, Birame Ould Dah Oudl Abeid, was simply fired from his position as Senior Adviser of the President of The National Commission for Human Rights. Prior to that action, the President of that quasi governmental body, Mohamed Said Hamody, himself from a haratin background, was fired as he refused to dismiss Birame Ould Abeid from his position as instructed by the authorities, and for continuing to mention slavery in the Commission periodical reports. For their part, a few days after their public appearance, all the imams left the public sphere and withdrew from the media. Some of them refused to discuss the issue with anyone, while many others continued to defend the same ideas in private. Not one of them became a full time activist.

Beyond the rather mixed outcome of this particular mobilization, the very idea of the existence of numerous haratin imams surprised the general Mauritanian public. In fact, the hot topic of slavery and its persistence itself has never ceased to be debated in Mauritania since the issue was first publically raised back in the late seventies. The

imams episode is however one of the most striking and controversial example of this ongoing debate. The very existence of imams from slave descent is an absolute novelty in Mauritania. Many free-born Islamic leaders from the religious elite consider it with suspicion. During fieldwork conducted in central Mauritania for his pioneering dissertation published back in 1997, the German sociologist Urs Peter Ruf heard about only three haratin men who had received a formal religious education². Meskerem Brhane who completed an equally important thesis two years earlier on the same topic in Nouakchott did not come across any imam of haratin background³. Ever since, the evolution has been spectacular. The total number of imams from this community is currently around two hundred out of a total of eight thousand imams in the whole country⁴.

In the framework of a book project devoted to the analysis of Islam and social transformations in Mauritania, I study the haratin imams in order to underscore the significance of the momentous changes affecting the construction of grassroots Islamic authority in a contemporary Islamic society. In the orientalist's vein, Islam has customarily been pitted against empowerment and emancipation of people from slave status of slave descent. It has been assumed that since the religious doctrine of Islam does not prohibit expressly slavery, it does thus endorse it⁵. The Muslim societies and Muslim scholars are the first one to accept this conception⁶. This paper considers some of the important facets of the construction of religious authority among social actors traditionally and, until recently, explicitly excluded from the mere possession of basic religious knowledge. The haratin and their descendants are usually prevented from

² Urs Petre Ruf, *Ending Slavery: Hierarchy, Dependency and Gender in Central Mauritania*, Frankfurt, LIT Verlag, 1999, p. 261

³ Meskerem Brhane, *Narrative of The Past, Politics of the Present: identity, subordination and the Haratin of Mauritania*, University of Chicago, Ph.D Dissertation, 1997.

⁴ According to the latest census conducted by by The Ministry of Islamic Affairs. See the official statement made in January 2011 by the Minister himself before the Parliament.

⁵ One of early first critiques of this conception is that of Frederic Cooper, *Islam and Cultural hegemony: "The ideology of Slave owners on the East African Coast, in Paul Lovejoy, The ideology of Slavery in Africa"*, in P. Lovejoy (ed.) *The Ideology of Slavery in Africa*, Beverly Hills and London, Sage Publications, 1981, pp. 245-270. On Islam and slaves agency both in African and transatlantic world, see Paul Lovejoy (ed.), *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam*, Princeton, Markus Wiener, 2004.

⁶ On all these facts and debates, see the synthesis by William Gervase Clarence Smith, *The Abolition of Slavery in Islam*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006.

acquiring even the minimum knowledge required of any Muslim in order to perform basic religious duties like praying or fasting etc. The social change in this country has affected the construction and contestation of Islamic authority in various ways that can hardly be explained only by the usual dichotomies like moderation *vs.* extremism, ulema *vs.* new intellectuals, reform *vs.* tradition and so on. In what follows, I begin by underlining the fact that scholarship on modern Islam and Muslim societies has so far rarely focused either on social and ethnic inequalities nor on the profession and the practices of imams as such; secondly, I provide an overview of the situation of haratin in Mauritania as well as of Mauritanian Islam in general and some of its recent transformations in this country; thirdly, I present a full translation of and comparison between the life stories of Bilal Ould Semetta, age 55, imam of the Riyadh Mosque, and that of Mbareck Ould Mahmoud, age 40, imam of the Ain Talh mosque in the opposite side of Nouakchott; finally, I present a crucial fatwa on slavery by Mauritanian faqih Mbareck Ould Mahmoud. My aim by considering this fatwa is to show clearly how modest and heterogeneous Islamic knowledge, gathered in a short amount of time, can be used to establish oneself as a legitimate Islamic scholar and challenge the exclusion that is supposed to prevent anyone from slave origin becoming or speaking as an Islamic scholar⁷.

Illegitimate topics: mosques, imams and social inequality

The social inequalities on the one hand, and the profession or the status of imams on the other hand, seem to attract little interest from the scholars of contemporary Muslim societies. Neither of these two topics seems to be of interest when it comes to modern forms of Islamic revival. However, in African studies scholarship, these topics are well-researched even though the bulk of scholarship devoted to the dynamic of Islam and social hierarchies is authored by historians. Throughout the history of Muslim West Africa, Islam has been at once a powerful mean to maintain people in slavery and an equally strong one to let them escape slavery, subordination and exploitation. Fighting against transatlantic slavery has been the main line of argumentation of the XIX century's jihads. In the XX century, the Sufi brotherhoods constituted their first of clients

thanks to runaway slaves. These Muslim movements took also advantage greatly from the collapse of the institution during the colonial times⁸. However, despite the fact that slave descent is still instrumental in categorizing people and the social categories in Contemporary Muslim societies, the agency and the religious factor in the emancipation of people from slave or caste groups is hardly studied.

Nevertheless, many issues considered by these historians of the West African Sahel are still relevant in many other societies elsewhere in the Muslim world today.

For example, in his forthcoming book, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960*, Bruce S. Hall⁹ analyses thoroughly the social construction of race in the history of Malian Niger Bend drawing, among many other sources, on manuscripts stored in Tombouctou, Mali. He shows in particular how Muslim scholars from the whole region (mainly from what is today Mauritania and Mali) managed to take into account the racial differences in their scholarship and how this, in turn, shaped the way in which social and racial hierarchies were perceived. At least one of the fatwa's studied by B. Hall addressed in a very direct manner the question of the imams from black race, their spelling abilities, and the validity of the prayer performed under their direction etc.¹⁰

In his *Islam and Social Change in Africa*, Sean Hanretta examines the Yacouba Sylla dissident West African Sufi order (*Tijaniyya hamawiyya*) and its trajectory during the first half of the twentieth century between Mauritania and Cote d'Ivoire¹¹. Most importantly, this work is concerned by Muslim authority, memory and human agency. By labelling the Sylla's followers as an "emancipatory community", he presents a sophisticated history of the transformations associated with colonial rule, slave emancipations and Sufi piety. Moreover, Hanretta integrates, in a coherent argument, the history of grassroots Sufism and social marginality, namely that of slaves and women.

⁸ For a highly subtle discussion of this scholarship in the light of the current discussions on Islamic revival, see James Searing, "Islam, Slavery and Jihad in West Africa", *History Compass* 4/5 (2006), pp. 761–779

⁹ Cambridge University Press, 2011 (May)

¹⁰ Bruce Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960*, *op. cit.* chapter 2. I thank Bruce Hall who kindly shared with me pieces of his forthcoming book.

¹¹ Sean Hanretta, *Islam and Social Change in Africa. History of an Emancipatory Community*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

For his part, in his unpublished thesis, Jeremy Berndt examines how in central Mali (specifically Gimbala) in the 1950s many Fulfulde ex-slaves managed to acquire Islamic knowledge and to establish themselves as Islamic scholars despite the opposition of the village's Muslim elites. He recounts in a very vivid way the way in which some of these slave-scholars challenged the legality of slavery in Islam. Even though they were only former slaves, the legitimacy of social inequality became a key theme in their religious preaching¹².

If the topic of ethnicity and race is well researched at least in the history of some West African societies, social scientists have almost ignored the study of mosque worship and imams. It is most striking that despite its centrality to the daily life of Muslims, the social life in the mosque is seldom¹³ dealt with in a comprehensive manner. No important book is devoted to imams across Islamic history or in the modern world. Many works have approached the discursive practices that originate in the mosques such as sermons and preaching. Those of Antoun, Gaffney, and Hirschkind, have been devoted to preachers, preaching or even to what the latter has termed as an "Islamic soundscape"¹⁴. Too many others have concentrated on intellectuals portraits of Muslims clerics. Muhammad Qasim Zaman tried not only to focus on the ulema in a comparative way from an Indian-Pakistani case study, but also criticized those (mainly Olivier Roy) who put the emphasis on the importance of the "lumpen-intelligentsia" and new intellectuals at the expense of the far more important (according to Zaman) established 'ulema'¹⁵. No mention of the importance of the imams or the 'ulema' as imams was stressed in these various approaches. For the most part, worship, piety and the daily practice of Islam is not privileged by the social scientific students of Islam. However, in

¹² Jeremy Raphael Berndt, *Closer than Your Jugular Vein: Muslim Intellectuals in a Malian Village, 1900 to the 1960s*, Ph. Dissertation, History, Northwestern University, June 2008, pp. 264-336.

¹³ One of the recent exceptions is the special issue of *Revue Du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 125, July 2009 titled :les Mosques. Espaces, Institutions et Pratiques, edited by Fariba Adelkhah and Abderrahmane Moussaoui.

¹⁴ Richard T. Antoun, *Muslim preacher in the modern world: a Jordanian case study in comparative perspective*, Princeton University Press, 1989; Patrick D. Gaffney, *The Prophet's pulpit: Islamic preaching in contemporary Egypt*, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1994. Charles Hirschkind, *The ethical soundscape : cassette sermons and Islamic counter publics*, New York : Columbia University Press, 2006.

¹⁵ Mohammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulema in Cotemporary Islam, Custodians of Change*, Princeton University Press, 2002, p 2.

her much discussed book, *The Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood focused, at least in the empirical component of her work, on the involvement of the Women's Mosque Movement in Cairo, Egypt during the 1990. Despite the fact that Mahmood devotes a great deal of energy to theoretical discussions aiming to dismiss or to downplay the importance of the agency of the women she is studying, she nevertheless acknowledges that the women "inhabit.. the norms" of piety that are imposed on them while also subverting them in order to carve out a place for their personhood in the mosque spaces. Moreover, one of Mahmood's informants, Hajja Fayza, tried to be the first woman to enter the Al-Azhar University or to become an acknowledged imam. Interestingly, these efforts were justified by some arguments drawn from the interpretation of *fiqh* itself¹⁶. Moreover, Mahmood states clearly that it is important to acknowledge the "*political efficacy of these movements*" even though they are situated on the "*ethical realm*".¹⁷

The same thing can indeed be said of the *haratin* imams whose actions are grounded in the realm of piety rather than in the political arena as we have seen above. More precisely, by striving to acquire a basic knowledge and establish themselves as imams, these Mauritians from slave descent could reach a level of religious dignity not previously allowed by Mauritanian society in general and on in particular by the arabo-berber (bizan) group to whom they "belonged". Becoming imam for a *haratin* is an unprecedented shift and as such is unexpected considering the long lasting rigidity of the social hierarchies in The Islamic Republic of Mauritania.

In order to grasp the significance of the transformations I am describing here, it is important to describe the *social status* of knowledge in Mauritania. It is also important to examine how Islam lies at the heart of the traditional social structure and hierarchy that the *haratin* imams, among other social actors, have been trying to subvert.

Islamic knowledge in Mauritania

¹⁶ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamist Revival and The Islamic Subject*, Princeton University Press, 2005, Chapter 3. For example pp. 87-88.

¹⁷ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety : The Islamist Revival ad The Islamic Subject*, p. 36

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is a country in which, above all, the majority of the population speaks Arabic. It is located at the crossroads of theological, cultural and intellectual connections linked to some of the global dynamics of the Sunni Muslim world. The Mauritanian context is, like many others, undoubtedly one where the power of religious brotherhoods and their abilities to adapt to changing conditions is combined to a very large degree with the importance of traditional Islam, the reformism trend and the Salafist breakthrough, including the jihadist current, in a climate of technical theological debate without parallel in surrounding countries¹⁸. The centuries-old role of this major centre of scholastic Malikism, its religious schools (*mahazir*, sing. *mahzara*), and the role of its *ulema* in the configuration of global and regional Islam have been poorly understood by the outside world. This role has long been disproportionate in respect to the country's modest economic and demographic weight. Non-Muslim external observers are sometimes ignorant of the evolution of Islamic scholarly tradition there and its recent globalization, which could have provided them with an interesting vantage-point to observe the relationship between globalism and localism within religious change.¹⁹

In fact, the historical trajectory of the country reveals that Islam was propagated in the region from the ninth century onwards through networks of trans-Saharan caravans before the proselytizing activities of the Almoravids (al-Murabitun), backed up by force of arms in the middle of the eleventh century, gave it a global scope which extended well outside the region to the borders of Europe itself. However, it was really the spread of Sufi brotherhoods from the start of the eighteenth century onwards which ensured the popular entrenchment of Islam and the development of a religious framework in the society.²⁰ This historical background demonstrates that the religion of

¹⁸ I am examining these aspects in Z. Ahmed Salem, "The Paradoxes of Islamic Radicalization in Mauritania" in George Joffe (ed.) *Islamic Radicalization in the Maghreb*, London, Routledge, and forthcoming June 2011.

¹⁹ On this, see Ould Ahmed Salem Z. (2007), "Islam in Mauritanian between political expansion and globalization: elites, institutions, knowledge and networks," in Soares B. and Otayek R. (eds)(2007), *Islam and Muslim politics in Africa*, Palgrave Macmillan (New York); 27-46

²⁰ On this complexity of these historical processes, see Norris H.T. (1964), "The wind of change in the Western Sahara," *The Geographical Journal*, **130**, 1 (March 1964); 1-14: Norris H.T. (1972), *The Saharan Myth and Saga*, Clarendon Press (Oxford); Ould Cheikh A.W. (nd), *Nomadisme, Islam et pouvoir politique dans la société maure précoloniale (XIème-XIXème siècles). Essai sur quelques aspects du tribalisme*, These de doctorat en sociologie, Université Paris V.

Mohammed has, to some degree, fashioned and even justified the physiognomy of social culture, the political imaginary and quotidian practices.²¹ Mauritania's social groups are often integrated into religious brotherhoods, such as the Shadhiliyya, the Tijjaniyya and the Ghadiriyya which have established regional networks, even if orthodox Malikite Islam is also central to the Mauritanian religious landscape, even within the brotherhoods.²² Knowledge, sanctity and religion thus have considerable social and historical weight throughout the territory. Islam is a veritable "national civilization"²³ and coincides with the Bilald Shinqit, the name by which the country was known until modern times.²⁴ In Muslim Africa, the Middle-East and the Maghreb, being *shinqiti* (from Shinqit) is definitely a label of Islamic knowledge and, particularly, mastery of Arabic poetry

Since at least the sixteenth century, Mauritania's "Moorish" society has developed a widespread Islamic literature in its own unique way. Three consequences of this situation should be mentioned: The first relates to the heritage that has resulted from this basic process of accumulation of a considerable body of works, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, in the form of manuscripts.²⁵ Ulrich Rebstock has noted that "more than five thousand Mauritanian authors [participated] in the production of around nine thousand authored works which represented the consolidated reflections of Mauritanian society on its religious, scientific, aesthetic and economic needs."²⁶ Indeed, a professor at Nouakchott University has just published, in

²¹ Stewart C.C. (1973), *Islam and social order in Mauritania*, Clarendon Press (Oxford).

²² See Ould Al-Barta, "Mutations des formes de religiosite: sources et debats," in Ould Ahmed Salem Z. (ed)(2004), *Les trajectoires d'un etat-frontiere: espaces, evolutions politiques et transformations sociales en Mauritanie*, CODESRIA (Dakar); 207-239

²³ This expression comes from Traore A. (1979), "L'Islam en Mauritanie," in CRESM/CEAN, *Introduction a la Mauritanie*, CNRS (Paris); 155

²⁴ Shinqit is the name by which Mauritania is known throughout the Muslim world. It is the name of an old caravans city in the north of the country, about which the article on "Mauritania" in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (French edition)(1992, Leiden, Paris: E.J. Brill and Maisonneuve & Larose, VII; 623) states, "The town of Shinqit or Chinguitti is reputed to be the seventh most holy town of Islam."

²⁵ Lydon G. (2004), "Inkwell in the Sahara: reflections on the production of Islamic knowledge in Bilald Shinqit," in Reese S. (ed)(2004), *The transmission of learning in Islamic Africa*, Brill (Leiden); 39-71.

²⁶ Rebstock U (1999), "La litterature mauritanienne. Portrait d'un heritage negligé," *L'Ouest Saharien*, 2; 179-184 (my translation from French)

thirteen volumes, almost 6,800 fatwas issued by ulema in Mauritania since the sixteenth century.²⁷

The second consequence is linked to the remarkable continuity of this particular tradition for, even today, Mauritanian individuals place themselves at the heart of the global production of Islamic knowledge and of authoritative Muslim networks. Their role in the preservation and renewal of international Islam is such that very few African, or Maghribi, personalities have reached the same level of internationalization. One example, can be mentioned here amongst dozens of others: Abdoullah Bin Bayyah (born in 1935), former minister of justice in Mauritania, is today one of the rare non-Wahhabi ulema whose fatwas are recognized by the Saudi government.²⁸ He continues to act as a professor at the University of King Abdelaziz in Jeddah and to act as vice-president of the International Union of Ulema, which is presided over by the Egyptian, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi. He also appears among the members of the International Body of Islamic Fiqh, created by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. Bin Bayyah is also a member of several sharia boards of major international banks, given his status as a recognized specialist in the Islamic law of minorities (*fiqh al-aqaliyyat*) and Islamic finance. He is one of the principal patrons of the well-known Zaytuna Institute in California which is directed by an American convert to Islam, Shaykh Hamza Hanson. The latter himself was educated in Mauritania, in the famous Islamic school (*mahzara*) of Al-Hajj Fahfou, which is located in the east of the country and is said by its many Western and Arab visitors to be very difficult to access. Shaykh Bin Bayyah is also the founder and president of the London based Global Centre for Guidance and Renewal, which is based in London.²⁹

A final example of the consequences of the status of Mauritania as an important Sahelian and Maghribi focal point within the cartography of the Islamic world is linked to the considerable attraction that its *mahzaras* exercise on dozens of Muslims across the

²⁷ Ould Al-Bara (ed) *Al-majmud al-kubra li fatwa wa Nawazil wa ahkam ahl gharb wa janub gharb as-sahra* [The major collection of fatwas, judgements and cases from the south-west of the Sahara and the Western Sahara], Imprimerie Al-Manar (Nouakchott), thirteen volumes, 2010.

²⁸ Oliver Roy claims that one of the four most influential scholars in Saudi Arabian Wahhabism is a certain "Shinquit, Mauritanian" as his name suggests. Roy O. (2004), *L'Islam mondialise*, second édition "Collection Points essais", Seuil (Paris); 152

²⁹ <http://www.binbayyah.net>

world who come to perfect their religious knowledge in these veritable universities of the desert which continue to contribute to the country's reputation.

Islam, Social hierarchy and Slavery

Located between the Western Sahara to the north and the Senegal River to the south, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania has a population of about three million. Its geographical position between the Arab world of North Africa and sub-Saharan Black Africa explains some of the ambiguities in Mauritania's complex national identity: Arab or/and African? Mauritania is divided along lines of race and ethnicity as well as social status. In terms of race, the main division is between Black African Mauritania or Afro-Mauritania and so-called 'White' Arab Berbers or Moors. Given the lack of official up-to-date statistics, it is estimated that nearly 25% are ethnic Black Africans (in particular, Haalpulaar, Soninke and Wolof). Arab-Berber Moors make up the majority of the population and refer to themselves as *bizan* ('Whites') even though more than half of them are, in fact, Black Moors. In terms of social status, the legacy of slavery is still a crucial factor in the social hierarchy of Mauritanian society today. Among both the Afro-Mauritania and the Moors (*bizan*), there is a clear divide between the masters and the slaves or people of slave descent. Servitude was solidly rooted in the rigid social hierarchy of all groups in Mauritanian society regardless of ethnic origin and the stigma of enslavement represented a widespread symbolic form of violence. Although this social division is often expressed in racial terms --white masters and black slaves--race and class do not fully coincide. More than half of the Moors are Black Moors or *haratin*, a group primarily made up of slaves (*abid*; singular: *abd*) and of persons freed from slavery (*haratin*. singular: *hartani*) and their descendants. In Afro-Mauritanian society, masters and slaves have the same skin color and servitude is less visible than in Moorish society. However, its significance is still symbolically highlighted by the society. Activists claim that more than half of the total population is of servile origins, but this remains disputed.

Islam in the country is at the root of social structures and the national cultural self-image. Mauritanian societies grant a special place in their traditional social hierarchy to clerical tribes and elites who preserve religious knowledge and exercise

spiritual power as well. At the bottom of the social hierarchy, we have the dominated castes made up of craftsmen, genealogists/bards and slaves/freed slaves. The existence of these occupational groups, no doubt, has always allowed the dominant “clerics” to give themselves over to contemplation and to the religious sciences.

Moorish (*bizan*) society has always practiced 'chattel slavery,' usually based on racial differences (Black slaves with Arab-Berber masters) and legitimated by a conservative interpretation of Islamic law. The considerable number of people with slave origins is evidence that slavery prevailed on a large scale and for a long time. In the Arabo-Berber (*bizan*) society, the monopoly of religious knowledge and power is even stronger: for example, despite the fact that the noble warriors were traditionally supposed to hold political power, in reality they depended on the clerical tribes. The latter were in charge of the spiritual economy of the community and its judicial as well as commercial wealth. Traditionally, if a noble warrior renounced the use of weapons and decided to devote his life to worship and religious knowledge, he was labelled “*taib*” meaning ‘repentant’, a very pejorative label that ultimately ensured the structural impossibility of any outsider entering a clerical clan (locally called *zawaya*).

Moreover, these categories are still meaningful for Mauritians in 2010. No religious leader is supposed to come from an exterior social category. Indeed, the former slaves are the last ones expected to do so. It is worth noting that, as Urs Peter Ruf put it, “the close association of haratin and slave origin in contemporary Mauritania is most prominently expressed by the use of haratin as a euphemism for both people of haratin status and abid (slaves)”³⁰. The status of slaves and even freed or manumitted slaves in this social hierarchy is that of despised and exploited outcasts. In the traditional nomadic environment, slaves were inevitably assigned the hardest tasks. They experienced “social death” (to quote Orlando Patterson) and total economic exploitation and, in terms of Islamic law, were considered legal minors. Questioning the legitimacy of slavery has often been considered to be going against the national religion. Under Islamic law, slaves are not free to marry, cannot own goods in their own name or inherit property. Nor can they dispose of their own children or bear testimony before a court of law. Freedom and emancipation are valid only if duly granted by the master. The sale or

³⁰ Urs Peter Ruf, *Ending Slavery: Hierarchy, Dependency and Gender in Central Mauritania*, p.39

conveyance of slaves as well as *jus primae noctis* were practiced until recently. Slaves labored under a kinship system that was all the more fictive since they belonged--in both senses of the word--to their master's family and tribe. Slaves and former slaves do not exist in the Arab-Berber group alone; as many scholars have argued, being from slave descent and leading the prayer is not even a possibility let alone debated among the Soninke or Haalpularen (Fulani) ethnicities in Mauritania³¹.

The country's successive governments have never seriously addressed the issue of slavery as such regardless of the ethnic groups involved. The colonial administration widely tolerated such practices and traditional slavery survived for a long time in post-colonial Mauritania. Despite the legal abolition of slavery in Mauritania in 1981 there is no evidence to suggest that practical steps have been taken to ensure its abolition in practice. Human rights abuses related to slavery persist in Mauritania, although the government denies their existence. Nevertheless, in 2007, a new government passed a new law making it a criminal offense. But, despite the many cases brought to court by human rights activists, no one has ever been found legally responsible. Mauritania's own laws and its international human rights obligations prohibit slavery, but anyone escaping slavery has no legal protection. There is considerable discrimination against those who have ceased to be enslaved and there is no official will to take the necessary remedial action to fully eradicate this socially divisive system. The dynamic of power and subordination is deep-rooted. Human rights abuses based on such discrimination, whether in the form of slavery-like practices or the denial of basic freedoms, are committed on a daily basis. The public authorities have always adopted an ambiguous stance, combining denial, embarrassment and *laissez faire*. Year after year, organizations involved in the fight against slavery are still reporting dozens of cases, although they usually refrain from estimating the number of victims. The aspiration to freedom still encounters barriers in odd situations in a country where, despite laws on abolition, the Constitution's preamble recognizes Sharia law as the main legal system. As applied by the courts, the pro-slavery interpretation of a not very codified Islamic law has led to

³¹ See for example Ousmane Kamara « Les divisions statutaires des descendants d'esclaves au Fuuta Tooro mauritanien », *Journal des Africanistes*, 2000, Vol. 70, issue 70/1-2, pp. 265-289. Roger Botte « Pouvoir du Livre, pouvoir des hommes : la religion comme critère de distinction », *Journal des Africanistes*, 1990, vol. 60, issue 60-2, pp. 37-51

litigation and disputes, sometimes inextricably in matters of inheritance, marriage, child custody, land ownership and salaries.

By the end of the 1970s, the haratin started to challenge social and political inequality by various means including through social movements well as through self-education. The *haratin* community has been politically shaped through struggles that have developed out of social, political and even ecological changes that need to be briefly summarized.

Fighting slavery, challenging traditional authority

It is usually, and rightly, claimed that several factors have contributed to the emergence of the *haratin* cause. Severe droughts in the 1970s undermined the conditions underlying both slavery and the agro-pastoral economy that corresponded to the traditional way of life. By forcing most of the slave-owning nomads to move to urban areas, this environmental catastrophe left many slaves destitute but free. Subsequently, the war in the Sahara, in which Mauritania was involved from 1975 to 1978, saw the enlistment of a large number of *haratin* troops who, in turn, gained a degree of collective emancipation. Finally but to a lesser degree, several young haratin university graduates decisively increased their group's social visibility. It was no accident that El-Hor, 'the organization for the liberation and the emancipation of the haratin' came into being in 1978, the year in which all these processes came to a head.

Ever since, Mauritania has offered a rare example of a emancipation movement founded and run by slaves, ex-slaves and descendants of slaves. This pioneering social movement enabled people of servile origins to carve out a place for their protest actions in the public sphere. El-Hor ('freeman' or 'emancipated' in Arabic) an organization founded in March 1978 by activists of slave descent, developed into a social and political movement that ultimately entered corridors of political power³². It was under its pressure that most of the laws against slavery were passed. The actions taken by the *haratin* movement have finally placed the question of improving the situation of the

³² For a recent study, Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, "Bare-foot activists: Transformations of the Haratin Movement in Mauritania", in Stephen Ellis, I. Van Kessel, *Social Movements in Africa*, Leiden, Brill, 2009, pp. 156-177.

social strata made up of slaves and their descendants on the national political agenda. The movement's itinerary has been deeply shaped over the years by a confluence of factors and shifts of positions in Mauritanian politics. Both El-Hor and NGOs like SOS – Esclaves, IRA etc. have played a crucial role in increasing awareness of the cause and have managed to obtain recognition for this social category in politics. Despite its institutional weakness as a result of its emergence as an underground movement, the *haratin* movement has been institutionalized through labor unions, political parties and civil society organizations. Nowadays, there are doubts about whether the *haratin* movement is a single cause since ever more diverse actors are now conveying its themes and messages. In addition, the diversified Haratin community has changed independently of the political struggles centered on it. As a consequence, and despite the prestige that El-Hor's founding members (like Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, Boubacar Ould Messaoud...) enjoy in national politics, it cannot be concluded that they have fully succeeded in creating a “moral ethnicity” unified around an identity in the pursuit of a common cause. And in spite of the current promotion of the haratin cause as an outstanding example of a human rights struggle, these changes are not likely to depoliticize an issue that runs so deep in debates about Mauritania's identity, current situation and prospects. The sizeable community that is descended from slaves still forms the country's most underprivileged social category. Strongly marked by the legacies of current and past enslavement, their emancipation is limited due to the poverty in which most of them still live.

However, the cumulative actions of the haratin social movement over the course of thirty years have been instrumental in publicizing the haratin community's demands. In the framework of so-called democratization in the 1990s, this visibility became even stronger. At the same time, the Islamic revival that started in the 1980s in Mauritania allowed this community to take advantage of new institutions of knowledge and literacy.

Islamic Revival, Public Piety and Social Change

The Islam that always served as an ideological tool for the legitimization of a social order based on inequality is today being re-conquered by the social categories

previously excluded by that ideology as they seek to raise their social rank and reach a level of a full religious dignity. In other words, intersecting process of social change among haratin on the one hand and the Islamic revival in Mauritania on the other hand, have deeply transformed the role of knowledge and the distribution of scholarly power in Mauritania society. Many haratin freed from bondage yet still illiterate benefited greatly from the increasing opportunities of Islamic training to fill the gap that separated them from the rest of the society. In a country where access to teaching and knowledge determines social rank, modifications in the traditional social hierarchies are reflected in a spectacular way in the religious realm. Two overlapping dynamics have crystallized this change: the renewal of *da`wa* efforts and the rapid growth in the number of mosques.

The political context in The Islamic Republic of Mauritania has always been favorable to the expansion of the religious sphere. From independence, the importance of “Islamic activist” trends had always been perceived as normal and natural. After having long been limited to religious affairs, this influence was extended to the political domain under the reign of Colonel Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla (1979-84), during which reformist Muslims were integrated into the management of public affairs. This situation was notably concretized by the adoption (never fundamentally challenged since) of *sharia* as the primary source of juridical norms. In the second half of the 1980s, preachers (*du`at*) intensified their efforts at the level of everyday society. Paradoxically, when faced with a great deal of government repression in the 1990’s, the fundamentalist current in Mauritania redeployed itself in *da`wa*. This provisional “retreat” from politics allowed it to gain ground and to win acceptance and understanding from its immediate rivals, the *‘ulama’*.³³

It was through preaching in the mosques that the Islamist movement regained its vigor. Successive periods of repression and calm paradoxically helped to publicize the formerly secretive Islamist movement, which was increasingly demonized, especially after the events that took place on the international scene in the early 2000s. However, internal political debates about foreign relations allowed the Islamist discourse to become increasingly audible. For example, when Mauritania began establishing

³³ On the Mauritanian ulama and their relationship to politics, see Yahya Ould Al-bara 2000.

diplomatic ties with Israel, there was a deep split among those religious leaders who had close ties to the state. In the context of the state's disengagement from the Palestinian cause and the internal decline of the pan-Arab movements--which had suffered considerably from purges within the Mauritanian regime that had long supported them--the Islamists were able to position themselves as defenders of the abandoned Palestinian and pan-Arab causes. In Mauritania itself, it recruited from all the most vulnerable sectors of society, including among *haratin*, where it made spectacular inroads.³⁴ I do not have enough space to venture in the intricacies of political Islam and its influence in Mauritania. However, it is worth noting the inroads it created in the *haratin* community came as a result of four factors: the first one is the spectacular development of small mosques; the second is the success of the Tablighi Jamat; the third is the work of the most important popular preacher in Mauritania since 1980, Shaykh Mohamed Ould Sidi Yahya³⁵; and the final decisive factor has been the successful attempt by the traditional schools (*mahazir*) to resist and to compete with all other Islamic external or national networks by opening their doors to all kind of people regardless of their social origins or background or even nationality.

The building and upkeep of a mosque are pious works for Muslims. Ever since the 1980s, funds from other nations as well as local pious donors have been flooding into every quarter of Nouakchott. The Mauritanian state itself, which had never built more than one mosque, graciously provided all kinds of support for the building of any kind of mosque. The growth rate of mosques in Mauritania is perhaps unique in the world: according to a census carried out in 2003, their number increased from 46 in 1989 to 617 in 2002. In January 2010, the Minister of Islamic Affairs declared before the Parliament that in Nouakchott alone his services have numbered exactly 6200 in total, and that 8200 mosques exist in the country as a whole. Currently, even though the great majority of these mosques are of modest or tiny size, mosques in Mauritania are truly everywhere: in the past twenty years, most public establishments or compounds (ministries,

³⁴ Political aspects of Islam are sometimes lived and perceived differently by the different categories and ethnic groups that make up Mauritanian society. On this point, see Yahya Ould al-bara 2000.

³⁵ For a comprehensive study of this preacher, see Z. Ould Ahmed Salem, « Prêcher dans le désert: l'Univers du Cheikh Sidi Yahya et l'évolution de l'islamisme mauritanien », *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara*, 15, 2001, pp.

governments offices, stadiums, universities, institutes, hospitals...) have built their own mosques. In general, the proliferation of these places of worship is entirely unplanned and disorganized. It is difficult for the Mauritanian administration to refuse to permit a mosque's construction. The building of a mosque has become a business for many brokers who tour the rich Muslim countries and raise money for their NGOs. The most common pretext for raising this money is to build one or several mosques. These new mosques are considerably more common in poorer, more populous neighborhoods than in richer ones.

As we have seen earlier, there exists in Mauritania an Islamic culture which is scholarly, prestigious, elaborate, and centered on traditional theological and Qur'anic study. Although Islam here is characterized by powerful Sufi orders, its real distinction lies in the most 'industrial' production of religious scholars and elites trained in the Maliki fiqh and hadith and enjoying a considerable reputation both in the international Islamist circles and in other Muslim countries. However, the average person attending the *mahazir* seeks only basic knowledge, such as memorizing a few verses of the Qur'an or basic writing and readings abilities. Beginning in the 1980s, these schools benefited greatly from the Islamic revival and its money. They tried to be widely open for local and international pupils. The *haratin* benefited a great deal in this era. Tablighi Jamaat established themselves in Mauritania as Islamic educators. The Tablighi Jamaat was encouraged by the authorities because of its conspicuously apolitical stance. It was even able to establish two preaching centers in the poorer neighborhoods of Nouakchott, while also obtaining the official support of the major theologians and imams of the country and the official religious establishment. Most of the people attending these education centers are from modest origins, such as the *haratin*.

As we will see in the interviews below, the popular preacher, Mohamed Ould Sid Yahya, has been identified as one of the few avowedly 'non-racist' imams who is willing to encourage *haratin* not only to gain knowledge but also to access key leadership positions in the religious arena. In the early 1990s, M. Brahne recorded the following statement by an interviewee: "there is an imam called Ould Sidi Yahya, he is not racist at all. We say, the *haratin* says, he is not racist at all. He invites all people to come to him.

He enables them all to study, always. (...) He says all people are equal (...) Ould Sidi Yahya says that God never said anything about being soudani [black]³⁶... A lot of Haratin come to him because they want knowledge and he gives it to them. I've seen Haratin who want to become imams of Mosques and he lets them be it"³⁷. At the time, Brhane could not or would not feature in her thesis any of these for they were really rare.

This is all the more worth noting since it goes without saying that according to the Maliki school of law as featured in the abridged treatise of Khilaf Ibn Ishaq al-Jundi (the most popular commentary on Maliki fiqh in the region), any imam should meet three main criteria: being an adult, in a good health and free (non slave). In a country where no one is ready to acknowledge anymore the persistence of slavery, no one can openly advocate his opposition to the haratin imamate. But, since almost no one in the country is willing to challenge directly this interpretation of the law, some, like Ould Sidi Yahya, simply avoid discussing such provisions or the conceptions on which they rest.

In fact, Shaykh Mohamed Ould Sidi Yahya is at once unique and emblematic of the new kind of purveyors of Islamist discourse. He is the first preacher whose cassettes are recorded and sold in the country since the early 1980s. His popularity and success have been steady ever since. He is also the only one who preaches in Hassaniya, or colloquial Arabic. Hence, his preaching is the first of its kind that anyone can access, especially the illiterate. His enormous success in the country can thus be explained by his comparative advantage in terms of accessibility. He became increasingly close to the *haratin* peoples despite his noble origin. He attracted many *haratin* to the new forms of piety and invited them to get involved in Islamic preaching. When attending one of his sermons in March 2010, I noticed that the *haratin* presence was much larger than it had been in the early 1990s. Now, as in an earlier observation in 1994, they are even more disproportionately represented within his immediate entourage and audience. Significantly, Ould Sidi Yahya is dismissed by most members of the religious establishment and dominant groups as a vulgar and simplistic crowd pleaser. Nonetheless, Ould Sidi Yahya was the first new Muslim intellectual who dared to allow

³⁶ Soudani means Black in the local Arabic (hassaniya) dialect

³⁷ M. Brhane, *Narratives of The Past, Politics of The present*, p. 202

persons from servile descent the right to lead the prayer and to encourage them in this endeavour.

In fact, however, Ould Sidi Yahya has been only the most outspoken supporter of the haratin in the Islamic field and his discourse is not racially oriented at all. His support for this community seems to be always implicit: he has never accepted to label his audience based on ethnic or racial terms nor is he interested in tackling directly these issues as such. As we shall see in the interviews below, none of my interviewees has been a direct disciple or a follower of Ould Sidi Yahya. This was a conscious choice as I wanted to shift the focus away from such persons to consider the diversity of the itineraries. Actually, most of the haratin interested in gaining knowledge and overcoming their religious dispossession strived to seize every occasion to tackle their ignorance. The interviews and statements indicate that Islamic grassroots organizations and networks and a wide variety of religious institutions, both national and international, were instrumental in their efforts. Even the Mauritanian state contributed to nurturing this quest for knowledge through a massive project from 1984 to 2005 devoted to tackling illiteracy in the country. Therefore, it would be misleading to attribute all of the gains of the haratin movement to the Islamic revival, even though the haratin were interested primarily in Islamic knowledge. The very reason of this interest is obvious: the power of knowledge was instrumental in their domination; if they were to gain social empowerment, the religious revival and quest for dignity was the best and most affordable way to achieve that goal. Reading the comments and insights of some imams from the haratin community, this seems quite self-evident.

From Slaves to Imams

How did former slaves become imams? Answering this question is the main objectives of the interviews presented herein. This is in fact the blunt question I asked my interviewees. They agreed to answer it without any hesitation. I was introduced to them by haratin activists I interviewed for another research project. They are fully aware of the objective of the study. They were clearly at once thrilled and somewhat pleased by the interest they sparked in a social science researcher, even though such a profession is hardly renowned in Mauritania, unlike that of a journalist for example.

However, featuring these interviews is a methodological stance. I wanted to do what social scientists always advocate without always being able to do: let the people speak and take their discourse seriously. The life stories I am featuring here are crucial in understanding the actors I am studying because in them they speak as individuals, citizens and scholars. Their former status as slaves lies at the heart of the denial of their freedom of expression as important social actors, let alone as scholars. They have never been given the opportunity to explain why it is important for a former slave to assess his personhood as not only a full Muslim subject, but also as a religious leader. Moreover, this testimony is interesting for it illustrates an original journey into the world of grassroots social actors. As such, these interviews are windows on the construction of citizenship and subjectivity in Muslim countries. I have chosen to present here the life stories of two imams neither of whom are involved heavily in any fundamentalist party or Islamic organization or even anti slavery movement. My goal is to see how a regular haratin holding the position of imam could reach this objective without being driven or supported directly by a collective and powerful movement. I am interested in why a haratin would strive to be renowned as an Islamic leader in his neighborhood or even his city. None of the imams I interviewed here was an activist in the haratin movement even though at least one of them (Bilal Ould Semetta) is personally and privately a firm supporter of and committed to advancing the haratin cause when given the opportunity, for example during elections.

I asked the imams to recount their story since their early childhood and their entire journey up to their current position. My only interventions were to clarify or to make sure that I understood correctly what they were saying. Listening to the records afterward, I noticed that both went through a series of shared, key milestones: first, thinking about how to overcome the condition of slavery; second, the moment of liberation itself; then the discovery of a pressing need for knowledge and efforts to become literate; finally, actually becoming imams. These journeys were long and arduous fights for both of them although in a very different manner. In what follows, I have organized the excerpts from both interviews in accordance with these “milestones”.

Finally, I would like to stress the fact that while Bilal Ould Semetta, the older haratin imam, is pleased with his status as imam and seems to stop his ambition there, M'Bareck Ould Mahmoud is striving to establish himself as a teacher as well as a scholar who can issue fatwas³⁸. I will present therefore the only sample of his production he was sufficiently proud of to be willing to share with me.

1- *Escaping Slavery: Paths of Liberation Bilal Ould Semetta, 55 years old*

"I was a slave during my entire childhood and adolescence, up until the age of about 25. I was born in 1955 in Wad Naga. I felt that religion was something that I was not a part of. I have no idea what religion is since unlike other children I never received any kind of education at all. In fact, I was excluded from religion, they wanted to exclude me from religious knowledge. In sum I was marginalized. When the master of my mother died, his son, who was born in the east of Mauritania, in the *Assaba* region precisely, came to claim his part of the inheritance from his father. Actually, when the inheritance was divided, it was revealed that I was the only "good" that he had. He abandoned the idea to take me as a slave because he did not see the interest in having a slave. Subsequently, one of his cousins asked him to give him this slave whom he did

³⁸ During my interviews, I could discuss with students at his mosque; some of them were from The Republic of Gambia already fluent in Arabic.

not want. I was then sent with this new master, to whom I was a gift, to the Northern part of the country, in the *Tiris* region. We lived between Tiris and Inchiri. I was sent at a very young age. I never asked questions. I lived as a shepherd tending to the herd of this new master. Of course, like other slaves, I accepted my destiny internally and thought it was natural for education and religion to not be part of my world where there was only work. I was intentionally excluded from religion, I was even intentionally excluded from the simple feeling of a familial life, and from the feeling of belonging to a family since my family ties were intentionally cut off. The filial sentiment was unknown to me because I had been cut off from it very early. I even remember that the papers that were attributed to me, as I discovered them later, contained a false birth date (1954 instead of 1955) and in the place of my mother's first name, there was the first name of another woman, her cousin in fact. I am unable to say if this was due to a plan designed to cover up my filiations or if it was mere negligence due to a lack of interest in my family ties or in my identity as a person. Back then I had very little memory of my mother. I believe that there is a sort of sorcery that diverts us from thinking about our family and that detaches us from the feeling of belonging to a family. They did not even inform me about my mother's death. I dreamed of it though. I cried in my sleep. The same night that she died, I dreamed that someone told me that my mother was dead. In a moment, someone raised my head and I woke up. I was dreaming that someone was telling me that my mother was dying. The next day, one of our friends who had been sent off to the city to buy some goods came back and brought some provisions. And as always, we were curious to know what the news in the big city was. We pressed him with questions. He told me: 'Bilal, you know, your mother died'. That was indeed painful but I was somehow expecting such information. Anyway, from my childhood if there is something that I would never forgive these people for it is refusing to inform me of religion and preventing me from having access to religious education... I do not forgive them for having preventing me from any access to religious life. I will never forgive them for that

We continued our nomadic and pastoral life between Inchiri and the north of the country. I was with the herds. The 1973 drought was very strong and the animals were tired. I brought them to their owners, my masters, in Inchiri. The herds had been

struggling; the animals were tired, some were sick and starved. Pastures were rare. I returned to Inchiri but I did not even think to see my family. Finally, I was sent to my home in the south-west, to Wad Naga... It is like this that I rediscovered my family... my masters no long needed me, I stayed with them a short while, after that they told me to leave....

My father was not a slave, but his six children were considered slaves because their mother was. He had done what he could to keep those of us who had succeeded in returning home. He had paid to purchase our freedom; he financially compensated the masters so that they did not take us from him again. For my part, I refused to leave when my so-called masters came over in order to bring me back to slavery. I resisted fiercely and threatened the man who tried to bring me back to work for him...

Mbareck ould Mahmoud, 40 years old

I was born around 1970 in the area surrounding the village of Afjayjir also called Ngaday, about fifty kilometers from Nouakchott.. My earliest memories start at the age of 7 or 8 years old. I lived in slavery of a particular genre: my family was dispersed between several masters. We inherited the slavery status from my mother and my brothers and sisters and I belonged to several different families. My eldest sister and I simultaneously belonged to four families that exploited us at each turn. We would spend a trimester with every family at their home. Since people were nomads back then, we used to travel as shepherds. We performed also all the domestic work. I have the memory of extreme child abuse and above all a lack of sufficient food. I could barely find something to eat. I was always starving. We had only a little to eat. I remember that I was very exhausted at night and that I fell asleep literally at once upon getting home. Therefore, I never ate at night: in the morning I searched for the remaining food. I have a very clear memory of one of my masters giving me the rest of some tea leaves that had already been used and that they normally give to the animals. I rummaged at an early hour in the morning in search of the leftovers following the slave women who could have saved a variety of leftovers from the diner of the night before. I was mistreated and hit for the smallest prank. While we were exploited at each turn by the three families, certain families were more lenient than others. Naturally, I had never been to school. I

remember that my sister met a village woman who had kindly welcomed me into her Qoranic school as a student. She was willing to teach me the Qoran, the Arab alphabet...I have a vague memory of this, but what I do remember is that one of the *women to whom we belonged* saw me several times taking the same path early in the morning to go to the Qoranic school. She called me and asked me, "Where do you go like that every morning for several days?" As a child I told her candidly, with the innocence of a child, "I am going to learn my Qoranic lessons." She was offended and said to me, "you are not allowed to learn the Qoran. Who are you to learn the Qoran? It is forbidden to you to return there." She even threatened me if ever she saw me again taking that direction. Of course, I no longer went to Qoranic school after that day...

The true change occurred in our lives when a hartani, a runaway slave, who had fled his masters in the north of the country came to our village. He was an extraordinary person. He had run from his masters who were from the famous tribe of R'gaybat. He recounted the various forms of ill-treatment and torture he had suffered at their hands, such as the 'torture of camels' etc. It was impressive, but he had fled and was free. He had married my sister and he advised us to run as well. He convinced my sister and one day at the end of a family's exploitation period (*ghilla*) while we were expected to rejoin the second family she decided to seize the opportunity for fleeing to Nouakchott. I recall vaguely that we came to take refuge at the place of some people in the fifth district and that we searched to rejoin our father who used to leave live in Nouakchott back then. However, we did not really know where he lived. We found him finally on the opposite side of the town.

My father received us warmly indeed and we stayed with him. He was so poor and had numerous other people to take care of. My sister had some clothes still at the village and asked how she could recover her possessions. My father proposed that he would go back to see our masters in order to collect her belongings. He went and negotiated the recuperation of her things...It was not easy. They had a huge argument indeed. Finally, the masters understood that my sister and I would never come back.

2-Achieving freedom, make a living

Bilal Ould Semetta, 55

In 1980, before the abolition of slavery was declared, rumors had circulated that said that slavery was not going to be abolished and that the masters could even recuperate their slaves. One of my younger brothers, who was almost 18 years old, had been taken and a witness told me he had gone to my masters house. I confronted the son who kidnapped my brother. I was very aggressive with him and his sisters told him, "we didn't want a slave; leave us alone." That is how I brought my brother back, but many events of this type took place in Nouakchott back then. It must be said that back then, the existence of El Hor permitted us to consolidate our position even if the movement's clandestine nature made it difficult for us to support it openly. However, I remember above all that I had an impression of Breika Ould M'bareck, the haratin military officer close to President Haidalla. Rumors told us that he had secret connections with El Hor, and above all, symbolically, his presence and his notoriety as a man of power has emboldened us and encouraged the slaves to refuse slavery and to confront masters because we knew that somewhere there was someone able to defend us. In this slightly special ambiance, I know the rumor of the possibility for some masters to recover their former slaves had pushed my former masters to want us, my sister and myself. I even heard that the family to which we belonged had built a true coalition (hilm) in order to recuperate us. The master who borrowed me during my youth had been solicited to be a part of that coalition. He said to the people who asked him to join the coalition that I was not really his slave; he had only borrowed me, that I did not belong to him ... In reaction to coalition, I alerted my closest friends and family and we prepared for confronting any operation of removal...These sort of incidents happened back then quite often...

I left the village for Nouakchott in 1979. I remember that on my way to Nouakchott, I stopped by a village. I asked a young woman to marry me, and then I was told that I have to talk first to her master. I asked where he might be, someone told me he is in the mosque. When I arrived at the mosque, the man told me that he had borrowed her. Her actual masters lived far from that village and I should try to make contact with them.... In the end I gave up indeed.

I left again to look for work in Nouakchott. I found some domestic work at the house of a certain Ould Nebagha, who helped me a lot and permitted me to make some substantial money. He was even generous with me and gave me a good salary; a very nice man. I rapidly accumulated a small number, of animals and money. He was truly a good man... I therefore thought at the beginning of the 80's that I should start my own business. I opened my boutique in the sixth arrondissement. The business worked very well and I started to have earnings and savings. It is in this context that I started to be influenced by the discourse of the El-Hor movement; I followed with interest this mobilization, I was taken by it rather far. But I wanted most of all to learn and to study. It was a real obsession.

M'Bareck Ould Mahmoud, 40

I started to work as a donkey-carter as a boy. I was only eleven years old. The salary was almost insignificant between paying the debts of my father; the food for the donkey etc. there was a little left over for me. As a child, they never sent me to school. My family was very poor and everybody had to work. I started to frequent the neighboring cinemas and to go to downtown. I was passionate about the cinema. I realized that the work did not help me in any way; I remember that I had done other jobs, but I was always obsessed with the cinema and downtown. I therefore went towards the Grand Hospital next to the former bus stop. This would have been the end of 1984 because I remember that there was the coup d'Etat in which President Haidalla was overthrown ... At the bus stop, I met a lot of people; I worked in a shop there. I met a lot of police officers because there was a police station not far from there. The police asked me to work for them in the commissariat to make tea and these sorts of things; they exploited me during several months. I started to claim my salary and they told me that they were going to pay me "with the fines' money," but in fact they never paid me. I started to insist and protest. One of their chiefs dealt me a memorable slap. I changed neighborhoods. I started to sell small things before the *Lansar Cinema* which was located not far from there. I had a small table with small products: unites of cigarettes, hot coffee and bread etc. Afterwards, I became extremely familiar with the Cinema people and they trusted me with small jobs; I swept the rooms. Things started to get truly better for

me financially. Then, they proposed that I become a “billposter” of the films. A new projection person called “Ali” had been recruited. We got along well, he taught me to use the projection machine. After that, I learned the first letters of the French alphabet. I even started to read the titles of programmed films. I remember around 1988, the Cinema owner changed; a French man bought the Cinema. This Frenchman started to appreciate me. He promoted me as the person in charge of scheduling the film screenings. He said that the films I put on the daily program always worked, that they were the most popular and attracted the most people, while Ali the projection person, his programs were too intellectual. I became the vice-programmer, which created a lot of problems between me and the projectionist who was a good friend of mine and who I appreciated a lot, but there was some jealousy... This bothered me a lot. When the Cinema owner proposed that I open and run the Cinema at Boghe, I jumped at the occasion to get myself far from the tense atmosphere at work in Nouakchott; it was around 1989-90. I spent seven months not far from Boghe, but down there in Boghe the mosque that was located nearby the cinema was greatly disturbed by our business... They protested strongly against our presence... We closed and returned to Nouakchott... It is necessary to say that the period when I turned twenty was very formational for me, not only during work but outside the workplace as well. I remember that the same questions came to my head without end: why did Islam tolerate slavery? How did it happen that it accepts inequality and this exploitation against us the Blacks (sudan)? These questions always ran in my head. My reflection in this sense never stopped. For me, these questions were incomprehensible. However, I equally believed that it was like this and that this was a sort of unjust and intolerable fatality.

3-Fighting Ignorance, Seeking Islamic knowledge

Bilal Ould Semetta, 55

I frequented the Islamic school al-Falah of Al-Hajj Mahmud Ba during a short period of time. Then, I joined the pro-Iraq Baath groups. Actually the Baath clandestine activists in Mauritania started to target and contact the *haratin*. They opened ‘night classes’ for literacy. They taught people to read and right. This is why they immediately attracted us, we were able to learn how to read and write. We were a group of friends

exclusively from the *haratin* community. Apparently, the pan-arabist movement has targeted the shantytowns (*kebbas*) whose dominant populations were ex-slaves indeed, *haratin*. Very quickly, they shifted their lessons toward ideological lessons on the Baath party, such as Saddam Hussein; it was a veritable action of indoctrination. We were instructed to meet up secretly, at night, to work on the Saddam's writings. We started to read and comment on the Hagiographic documentation on Saddam. We learned to venerate Saddam and to prepare for the revolution. We were given books to read only when we were alone, never in front of other family members, etc. The meetings took place late at night, and the political police chased us occasionally. We were careful to be secretive, clinging to the walls. We even had secret code names that replaced our own names. It seemed at the time that the Iraq embassy spent without counting for the formation of this campaign. Certain Baath leaders in Mauritania such as Isselmou, Dede Mohamed Lemine Saleck...were involved and would come occasionally to encourage us.

The objective was clearly not religious, but only political. The literature distributed glorified Saddam Hussein. It seems that we were preparing ourselves for an uprising. In short, we found ourselves in the process of indoctrination while our objective was only to learn and to gain knowledge, not to be involved in politics. One night, we, the *haratin*, we gathered and we asked ourselves 'why did we take these many precautions and risks? This engagement did not enter into our objectives.' We decided to break with this movement and to burn all their documents. Afterward, we enrolled in the al-Faruq institution financed by Qatar and run by Mohamed Abderrahmane Ould Mohamed Mahmud, a man from the tribe of Tadjakanet. Courses of religious instruction were given regularly and teachings of religious sciences as well as the Qoran. It is there that we received a good amount of religious knowledge. At the same time, through the 1980's, the first mosque was created by the *Haratin* in the slums of Arafat, it transpired from the mosque Al-Nour, it was a kind of mosque, a sort of shack actually. We created later the Al-Irchad mosque in the sixth arrondissement which was also built from the same material as a shack. The *haratin* had been encouraged to become Imams by Ould Sidi Yahya. He was the first scholar to accept the prayer to be lead by a *haratin*; he preached and then when it was time to pray, he would leave space

for any haratin to lead the prayer without asking him if he was “free, manumitted” or “legally a slave.” he claimed in the mosque that the haratin were as qualified anybody else. He would pray ‘behind’ any one of us. I was not among the assiduous students of Ould Sidi Yahya, but certain close friends of mine were. The Imam of the first mosque lead by a haratin imam was a student and loyal to Ould Sidi Yahya. We realized that the *haratin* had taken possession of religion and religious knowledge that for such a longtime had been hidden from them. We were taking part in something we had been prevented from partaking: access to religion. At the same time, we discovered at *Ibn Abbas Institute*, at the Grand Mosque of Nouakchott, an organization called The Mosques and Mahadras Committee (*Lajinat al-Masajid Wa Al-Mahazir*). They expressed their interest in helping us in the future. I will talk to you about them later. By the way, it is necessary to mention two important figures of that organization: Hajji, the famous trader and Abdou Maham, the wealthy man. Both of these men were prosperous business men. These two men did a great deal of work in order to support and to finance the first haratin mosques. During the eighties, we continued to deepen our knowledge and to learn the Qoran and Fiqh. It was absolutely necessary to master the knowledge that served to enslave us, by which we had been enslaved...This drove me, along with a group of my close friends (Boulkheir, Al-id, etc.), to launch a small group of prayer as well as a small mosque in a shack next to a bus stop in the fifth arrondissement. That was back in 1989-1990. By this date, the shantytowns were dismantled and their inhabitants were transferred to where we are now, in this neighborhood Riyadh, or “Pikats” as we called it. I transferred the mosque project here. We had plenty of space there. We had neither electricity nor running water, nothing, but plenty of space. I put the shack here on a plot not far from the house. From then onward, I started my saga, my unending battle, a glimpse of fighting actually....

M’Bareck Ould Mahmoud, 40

My analyst spirit had been formed most of all by the Radio, the Arab programs of the BBC were very popular: I listened to them quite often. One program was particularly noteworthy for me: it is “*Al-siyasa bayna al-sail wal-Maujib*” (*Politics Question and Answer*): the listeners asked questions and the journalists gave the response or called

upon an expert to give the answer... and several of the questions asked at this time period were about Mandela, South Africa, the exploitation of Blacks, the domination of Whites, racial inequality, etc... This accentuated my questions in reference to Islamic tolerance of slavery. I always had this question which ran in my head: how could Islam accept and legitimize slavery...? Why did Islam place us in this position...? The songs about Mandela, about the struggle of Blacks in South Africa interested me the most...

That period of my life was full of personal questioning: I was in my twenties; I was in search of responses about the meaning of life and about my ignorance. I had a small shop in the outskirts of the market... I used to buy bread in the bakery that was located across from the Shurafa mosque when I finished my work at the Cinema. I would go very early to the bakery in order to collect the bread for my shop. I would wait until the opening of the bakery. While waiting, I would take the opportunity to perform the morning prayer (*salat al-sub'h*). At the same time every day, a friend named Chighali passed regularly before the Cinema and he used to invite me to join him in the mosque. I accepted quite often. I started to stay there and then sleep inside the mosque like a student. I would spend the night there, praying in the morning and then buy fresh bread. I found a lot of personal satisfaction there it was very agreeable and brought me a lot of spiritual comfort. I became more and more pleased in visiting the mosque and staying there; listening to the lessons that they gave there. A Pakistani called Faruq was frequently at the mosque. He was a member of the *du'at, jama'at al-tabligh*. I learned better the rules of prayer and certain hadiths. I started to approach the *du'at*, to do some proselytizing tours (*khurūj*) with them. They started to invite me and to encourage me.

The Tablighi taught me the fundamentals of preaching, the methods, the stories to tell people, etc... I even began to preach to my friends at the Cinema who, for their part, were shocked by my sudden conversion... One day I decided to drop everything and to learn, to educate myself. This was the result of a humiliating moment. One time, when we were on our tour of *da'wa*, we arrived at a house and my friends told me to preach and I stayed quiet, I could not speak, not a single word left my mouth and I stayed planted there. It was an extraordinary embarrassment. It was there that I decided that I could no longer be ignorant.... I rejoined a mahzara called *al-Fath*, in the Sixth

district of Nouakchott. I began to learn the Arabic alphabet, the letters: everyone mocked this 'old' fellow who was on the same level of children learning the letters and so on, but I ignored all that. I was determined; but at that *mahzara*, I could not learn that much; their methodology was not effective; It did not work for me. Thereafter, I went to a new *mahzara* closer to downtown, in the Moroccan mosque run by Abdul Aziz Sy, Imam and Sheikh of this mahzara. He taught us a completely different method, more effective: it's there that I memorized two *hizb* of the Qoran. This Qoranic instruction has been like a second birth for me. Before that I never knew the difference between Allah and the Prophet Muhammad. I always say my second birth is when I began to make the clear distinction between Allah and his Messenger, between Allah and the Prophet... I was a victim of three weaknesses: poverty, ignorance and sickness because I had fallen sick at that time...It was back then that my father died... And then, I was no longer able to rely on anyone, I did not have any other material assistance, or a place where I could take refuge in case of material problems... My family, my brothers began to exert very strong pressure on me. I was considered "ill", so much that I was physically exhausted, malnourished and poor. So my older brother took me to a sheikh in the neighborhood and asked him to "cure" me. Being obsessed like that by the knowledge was deemed a symptom of a mental health issue in my own social environment. The Sheikh said that I would never be able to learn and I would be better to try to start having a normal life, working, having a regular job, if really I wanted to "recover." Therefore I began to work with my brother in masonry... But very quickly, the desire to learn came back. I struggled with the fact that I could not admit that slavery is an Islamic idea and I searched for the explanation in Islamic knowledge. Challenging slavery had always been presented to me as a sin, which was analogous to challenging Islam...I could not cope with or live with that. I joined a *mahzara* located in another neighborhood farther from the family, secretively and without telling my family. I went over there telling them I had found a job elsewhere. I moved to a mahzara called "*Shuhaad badr*" directed by an imam who was also a qadi at the justice department. The teacher who taught us was called Neine Ould Bah. He worked at the courthouse and taught in the mahzara at the same time... I began to study the books of Ibn Achir, Al-Akhdari, the hadiths etc. We quickly grew to like one another and I was named interim muezzin... I was teased by

the other students for being the teacher's pet and his guard dog because I was responsible for the storage where we stored the food and the donations received by the *mahazra*... I studied, I was improving, but the atmosphere was not very good with my fellow students because they all said that I was "*the black crow: al-ghurab al-aswad*" who hung around the camp and of which no one knows neither the origins nor the reasons of its presence... I was the only black of the mahzara actually. They especially did not appreciate that I was close to the Sheikh who had appointed me as manager of the donations stock... I was living at the mosque but I did not stop visiting the du'at indeed.

The 1992 presidential elections created some tensions at the mosque. Most people were for the current power, the Taya regime, which I was horrified of and found intolerably dictatorial. That created a lot of problems for me. The neighborhood was permeated by the photos and demonstrations of the campaign in favor of Ould Taya. The opposition was disapproved of by the majority of my companions in this mosque and I was somewhat looked down upon when I expressed my opinion. One day, someone tore all the posters of President Taya on the surrounding walls. Everyone began to look at me with suspicion, especially because one time I asked some women who ran a campaign spot for Ould Taya's electoral campaign to shut down their place. I told them that it was not allowed to play music in the mosque vicinity. They would disturb the calls for prayer. This action led me to be summoned from the man who originally built the mosque. He called me to his house and accused me of having orchestrated these sabotages. Consequently, he banished and forbid me to even come close to the mosque. He warned the students that I was going to be thrown out and some who did not like me of course celebrated the act. When he heard of that, the Sheikh summoned me and went with me to the mosque benefactor's house to make things clear. When I displayed my arguments he said he wanted to put an end to the dispute, but it was my turn to refuse and to say that he accused me of a lot of things ... Things were back to normal, but it is necessary to clarify that in this crisis, some members from the tribe to which I originally belonged who heard of my expulsion wanted to stand by me and defend me. I told them I did not need their help, that I did not solicit it either... In fact, I was hiding from my family and did not want anyone to know where I was hidden...

One of the problems that I encountered in this mahzara was related to the lesson about hadith and their commentary in front of the people just after the prayer. When I took the word in order to do this, they told me that the hadith is complicated and that a profound mastery of its meaning was needed to explain and analyze it properly. There had been a lot of discussions about this subject, but I continued to engage in these sessions... I did not know *fiqh* and I was not interested in *fiqh* because it accepted slavery and its permissibility in Islam. I did not trust the maliki *fiqh*... I was cautious with Malik commentators and of *fiqh* in general... I did not trust it; I did not want to deal with it... So I preferred the hadith...

I continued to be involved in the da'wa every Thursday night at the Shurafa mosque... I had begun to memorize nearly 25 *hizbs*, nearly a third of the Qoran... However, I realized I needed to start working again to earn a living. I asked a member of the du'at for a job and he hired me in his shop ...

Later, I was invited by some of my colleagues from the mahzara, from the tribe of *Messouma*, to accompany them to a *mahzara* in Assaba... I spent seven months there between 1993 and 1994... However, once there, I realized that leaving there was exhausting. I lived in the mahzara there, but the food was very poor. I lost a lot of weight. Still, I continued to memorize the Qoran. One day, I decided that I was too exhausted and I left this mahzara in the middle of the desert to go toward Maghta Lahjar, which is a small city closer to Nouakchott and I continued the memorization of the Qoran in that city... After that, I came back to Nouakchott to start work again. The final study tours were extremely tiring, in conditions of extreme deprivation...

In 1994 I found a job again at the central bus station in Nouakchott: I sold used vehicle tires and performed shoe shining as well; I must say that, that job went fairly well. At the same time, I wanted to join a mosque and I had chosen the Buddah Ould Al-Bousseiry³⁹ mosque in Al-Mechrou in the first district... There was a very stiff competition to obtain an official post as muezzin; I also especially wanted to study the

³⁹ Bouddah Ould al-Bousseiry who died in 2009 is one of the most famous and renown ulema in Mauritania. He was the national mufti and the main imam of the main mosque of Nouakchott since 1959 until his death. He has his own mosque and mahzara in the quarter called al-Machru...

hadith that fascinated and intrigued me... I did not ever want to approach Malik and its commentators because they told us we recognized slavery as a lawful practice... Therefore I focused the collection of hadith *Bulugh al-Maram d'Abul Hajar Al-asqalani*. That led me to be interested by another book called *al-Tuhfa al-Sunniya*... The instruction of Buddah helped me a lot. I had always been well taught by him because he could dedicate long periods of time to teach me the correct pronunciation. At the time I had a lot of problems with spelling and the grammar. I still had not sufficiently mastered the rules of grammar even if I memorized the Qoran already... I also did some small speeches between prayers and I tackled all the social problems without taboos from the Islamic point of view. In fact I preached. One time Buddah told me that there was an intelligence officer who gave him my name. That officer was complaining to him about the content of my sermons that he felt opposed the government. Therefore Buddah told me to stop because the government will never believe that I was doing these sermons freely as a student at Buddah's mahzara. He then would be held responsible or even considered the instigator of these politically incorrect sermons. Naturally, I stopped these sermons...

4. 'Hands off my Mosque'

Bilal Ould Semetta, 55

I decided to seek official recognition from the Department of Islamic Affairs for my mosque project. That proved very hard, almost impossible. I could not obtain the authorization to construct the mosque. Every time that I filled out an application for an official 'recognition' of this mosque with myself as Imam, I ran into a wall of incomprehension and of unspoken refusal, never explicit though. They would ask me who is the Imam and when I replied Bilal Ould Semetta⁴⁰, the faces tensed and tightened with anger. I faced also many maneuvers: sometimes the application was purportedly lost, or pieces of paper were missing, then the folder was lost again... The administrative harassment was interminable. One day, a white Moor (*bizan*) came to live in the neighborhood and he prayed with us. I took the opportunity and asked my friends to

⁴⁰ The names of both imams are typically names of haratin in Mauritania.

name him Imam with myself as deputy imam. The “bizan” Imam leads the Friday communal prayer while I directed the five common daily prayers. Not surprisingly, when we applied with his name as imam, the authorities released quickly the paper recognizing the mosque as an official one. We had the official recognition of our mosque.

At the same time, another ‘white’ imam came to create his own mosque in the immediate vicinity of ours. We brought a complaint forward against him because he did not have the right. We went to the Ministry in order to have a settlement. The Ministry instructed us to accept him as a board (jema’a) member in our mosque. In exchange, he was instructed to renounce the opening of his mosque. During a time period, he had accepted to stay in our committee but we saw well that it did not satisfy him. The tension was perceptible; he appeared outraged by the fact that I was better placed than himself in the hierarchy of the mosque and that the jema’a was clearly dominated by haratin. His objective was clearly to dismantle our mosque or to take control of it. He started to recreate an application of his own and sought authorization from the Ministry to run a mosque. He had some tribal cousins and friends at the Ministry, recently appointed there and he tried to seize the opportunity in order to advance his own project. His central argument was that the mosque was led during all the prayers by a slave and that this was a sin, the prayer of all these Muslims were invalid. Every time I was asked to come to the Ministry to discuss the issue of who was leading the prayer, I could see very well that the question of my status would be brought again on the table. Even for the discussions in the neighborhood, it was a sort of leitmotiv. I decided that I should obtain my document of liberation in religious and social form: an Islamic *manumission*. I knew the young man who was supposed to be my master. I knew where he lived in Nouakchott and that he was a merchant at the central market in Nouakchott. I had come across him several times and he had always been very correct with me. I went to see him and he told me frankly: *“I am completely willing to make these manumission papers for you immediately; I always wanted to do so but I believed that you did not want it or you might be offended by such an act; that’s why I never dared to give you a formal manumission. Now that you ask for it, I will make it immediately.”* I have had the paper until now. I was sure back then that it would be helpful in my ongoing battle. I returned to

see Mohamed Abderrahmane Ould Muhammad Mahmud, the Director of the Al-Faruq Institute where I studied originally seeking advice and support regarding the best way to have my status as chief imam recognized officially. He told me that it was not going to be easy, but he advised me that the best way to raise support would be to contact Buddah Ould Al-Bousseiry and to seek a Fatwa about this question. He can also give me a recommendation. I went to see Buddah. When I went to see Buddah, I was received by one of his assistants who happened to be by an amazing coincidence a member of the family of my ex-masters. He asked frankly: "*Bilal, why do you want to become a mosque Imam while you are a slave? Since when are you free?*" I showed him my manumission papers... he told me then Ok and he wrote me a recommendation (*Tawsiyya*) signed afterward by Bouddah himself. The paper consisted simply of recognizing the mosque as being a useful mosque, that it played a role and asked everyone who could help to support it and to support me as imam.

This huge step allowed me to start thinking concretely about constructing a new building for the mosque. A lot of people helped me then. The Haratin Minister and one of the main founding members of El-Hor, Mohamed Lemine Ould Ahmed, helped me with some money. I start raising money after the prayer in the big mosques. I went to see the Imam of such a mosque and I told him to present me to the people and urge them to support the construction of our mosque... I noted that while I said the Imam of the mosque's name (Bilal) to help, the people were surprised and systematically changed their attitude. All my Haratin friends' imams experienced the same attitude, they faced the same intolerance. If the last name and first name connoted the Imam's origin, the attitude was clearly negative. Some told us very clearly that the Haratin could not be imams... I have to say that during this time, a lot of people told me to contact influential people. I always refused to contact people of my tribe ("my masters") or to rely on them. It was out of the question for me. Moreover, it is them that had contacted me during the 1990 elections while Messaoud Ould Boukheir (the father figure of the Haratin Movement in Mauritania) was running for presidential elections in 2003, 2007 and 2009. They asked me to join them for the other candidate, for example recently the Islamist candidate. I told them in substance: "*You did my politics for a long time. It is up to me to do my own politics now; you people already did enough damage, you led me for a long time,*

I know you very well now, you will no longer possess me or betray me..." Since I left my chains of slavery, I have had an aversion to the white Moors, I never trust them; I always preferred my fellow Haratin; I recall that from the first municipal election of 1986, I had made this choice; in 1990, with the candidature of Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, I had chosen my camp and mobilized for his candidature in spite of all the solicitations to do otherwise. Even outside of the last elections, Tawassoul, a part of the Islamists had approached me so that I would campaigned for them under the umbrella of the Imam Association (*Rabitat al-a'ima*) of which I am the vice-president. I categorically refused and I tried to tell them that no haratin had ever been president and that it was time to try a haratin by in electing Messaoud. People from the Tawassoul (the islamist party) did not understand. I tried to convince them to rally for Messaoud and to vote for him more than for the Islamists. Moreover all the Haratin Imams campaigned for Messaoud and voted for him. To the question of knowing since when have I fought for this cause, the answer is therefore since forever, in my own way. Within the Imams and the Ulema circles, we tried everything in order to make them declare slavery unlawful in Islam. However, every time, they refused to even recognize that it exists. They have slaves in their family, in the city and in the desert, but they refuse to recognize slavery as a reality. Therefore, it becomes difficult to condemn something which you do not recognize as a reality; something which does not exist. Sometimes they avoid the subject or say that true slavery is that which was practiced by the Europeans, etc. They are really unbelievable"

In the middle of the 90's, the concurrent mosque was re-launched. The conflict broke out anew. I brought forth a new complaint: the police commissioner, the famous Dames, instructed the other mosque's Imam to renounce his project. He told me also that he had informed the imam of the interdiction of his mosque... In the middle of this conflict, our Friday Imam left us. He did not want to continue to live in a situation of conflict and preferred simply to renounce. It is necessary to say that he was always with us and he never openly showed us the smallest defiance. This was also the same thing for the imam of the concurrent mosque. He kept quite all that time waiting for an opportunity to betray us. A few months after he was instructed by the police to renounce his project, he started again. It is amazing that Sghair Ould Mbareck (another

founding member of El-Hor who left the anti-slavery cause officially in the early nineties) was Minister of Justice back then. They even built a strong coalition in order to beat us and to shut down our mosque.

The Director of the Awqaf at the Ministry was indeed on their side... They claimed that the other imam has already had full financing to build a mosque. They told me that if I did not have the means to construct the mosque, the other man would do it. He had the financing and he would be authorized to construct the mosque and that I should accept this. According to them, based on religion, it is the first mosque finished that receives the priority to welcome priors during the Friday communal prayer. I accepted this rule under the constraint but I tried to take advantage of it. I asked them to give me in exchange a construction permit and leave the possibility open for me just in case just I was able to raise the money on time or before he did. They accepted and gave me all the papers...

It was therefore a race for who would succeed in finishing his mosque before the other. I gathered my group and we went to the Mahazir and Mosques Committee. We went everywhere. But in spite of everything, his mosque construction was completed well before ours. While the construction works at their mosque were completely finished, we were just beginning to put up the roof. ... The problem posed was to know in which mosque one should pray. I showed my determination to pray the Friday prayer in my mosque despite the pressure to make me renounce this. The result: all of the Moorish were displaced for the Friday prayer because they attended a neutral mosque located farther in the south. I led the prayer for the first time that Friday. And he called people to pray in his mosque, but not many people came to see him and I have to say that only few haratin prayed with me... The Hakem (prefect) called us to his office separately and told us that this was an attempt to disturb the public order and that it was an offense. The Hakem proposed that he would place a consensual Imam in my mosque and that everybody would pray there. I categorically refused this solution and showed in a violent fashion before the Hakim that I was going to continue to pray all the prayers and to lead them and that it was not a question to give my place to a consensual Imam... I clearly informed him that he should use public force if he really wanted me to leave the mosque...

Someone told me to contact the preacher and scholar Ould Sidi Yahya. I met with Ould Sidi Yahya and showed him my papers and he told me 'you are right'. He wrote a fatwa in favor of my mosque as being that which must welcome the prayer because of it preceded the other; he asked Buddah and the great scholar Mohamed Salem Ould Adoud who equally did the same thing and endorsed his fatwa. My mosque was declared the legitimate one. During all of this, I declared that the director of Islamic orientation was next to the concurrent mosque, that our concurrent had some important support on the department in charge of Islamic Affairs. I wanted to attack them by publicizing the scandal in the media. I called the *al-Bouchra* journal; they wrote an article that sharply criticized the Direction of Islamic Affairs at the Ministry. They even made me say things that I had not said in reality in order to embarrass the Ministry. I recall that while I went to the minister during the following days, people that I knew addressed me in saying that the article had made an impact on the people there. During the same time, the mosque next to ours could not function because the authorities had still not officially inaugurated it; this did not inhibit him from praying on Fridays. Little by little, all of the Moors progressively migrated towards his mosque and we were ourselves among only haratin. This situation continued until 2003 while the Minister of Islamic Affairs at that time, Isselmou Ould Sid'El Mustaph started his campaign against the so-called extremist mosques... He called them the "*dhirar*" mosques. I could display all my official and religious documentation signed by the highest authorities etc. I produced my documentation and no one was able of doing the same. The guy was not able to display a full administrative file. His mosque was shut down. Order was given to the mosque to no longer pray the Friday communal prayer. He then tried with the support of the Minister to be named the assistant in my mosque. It was my turn to refuse in spite of the Minister's intervention. As they insisted to impose him as assistant, I called upon the haratin Imams. We held a demonstration before the Minister of Islamic Affairs. I went to the same time to the house of Abdou Maham, from the Mosques and Mahzara Committee, very close to the President of the country. I told him the problem, I showed him my documents and told him the whole background of the situation. He immediately telephoned the Minister and instructed him to leave me alone. He told him you are making problems for the government and the public order.

The coordination of haratin imams worked in this occasion. It is necessary to say that our movement was subsequently implicitly recognized. One day Daha Ould Maouloud told me that Abdou Maham asked him to bring ten haratin Imams to his house. He encouraged us and promised his help. He distributed to us financial aids, land plots and personally, he gave me two plots in Tevragh Zeina, the richest neighborhood in the country. He never asked us to help him or to support him in politics. This was in the name of Islam only, for Allah only...

You know we fought a lot, this was never easy for us; this was always an everyday fight...

The famous family (Ennahwi) [from the tijaniya ibrahimiya] attacked us once. I told them once to finance a fence for my mosque as I knew about their connections with international charities. I explained to them the problem of fencing around the building. They accepted right away and sent an engineer with a man in charge of this type of work at their place. When they arrived here, the representative of Shaykh started to give precise instructions to the engineer who accompanied him. He told him notably to do the minaret following the architectural style of their obedience Tijaniyya. They pretended as if I did not exist. I decided to wait till the end of the visit to see what they had in mind and when we had a meeting afterward here in my house, they told me what they had in mind. They asked me to retire from the mosque and suggested that they were going to construct a mahzara for me in which I was going to teach the Qoran etc. I said 'but it is not for this that we have solicited you and I am going to return to see the Shaykh to explain to him that I wanted help and not to sell my mosque. I went there and I told him that, he tried to calm me down because I was very upset... He told me that it was maybe a misunderstanding. They went to the Minister to seek help knowing already that the 'prefect' of the zone was a member of their family. They contacted a man called Daha Ould Maouloud who buzzed about with them. He was a sort of person in charge for Islamic affairs at the secret security services I guess. Their administrative argument was that I was not an approved Imam and that they could ask the ministry to appoint an imam who can do business with them and accept their plans. I called upon my fellow haratin imams, colleagues and friends; we decided to invade the Daha Ould

Maouloud's office at the Social security office where he used to work. I think that was a sort of cover for him. When we invaded his office, he started panicking; he asked me if I had an attestation (*ifada*) as imam fully approved by the Islamic Affairs Department. I showed him the paper. I have had it released thanks to my accountancies at the ministry. He did not believe it. He did not hesitate to call the Enahwni Family. He told them straight away that: "*this fellow has an Ifada as a principal Imam: he is not attackable, you are wasting your time, I can not do anything for you anymore, and his documentation is official*". That attack against us stopped there...

Mbareck ould Mahmoud

I needed to have a mosque here in my neighborhood which was at the time a new area with mostly temporary slums and constructions. I had a lot of haratin friends who lived here as well even though I came here occasionally. I met with them and explained that we needed to create a place of prayer. I convened this meeting only with haratin and not white Moors because I was convinced they would not agree to be bound religiously to a former slave. The issue was not on the table. I brought together about thirty people who immediately gave their agreement. Bouddah Ould al-Boussairy equally encouraged me when I told him about the idea. Actually, Buddah always supported me. When I told him I was still a slave legally, *islamically* speaking, he would look at me and say, "you are not, you are a Liar, aren't you?" I tried several times to have a discussion with him, and he always told me "you are not a slave." He was never willing to discuss the issue with me, even though he did recognize in his preaching the 'slave' category...This was very strange for me. We bought a shack and chose a vacant plot not yet assigned where we built the mosque with contributions from members. We made a written statement of creation for the mosque, with the signatures of about thirty people. Ever since, no Moors (bizan) ever came to pray with us. Some people in the neighborhood started to call the mosque "The mosque of the Slaves." We also created a mahzara to teach the Qoran to children from our community... I was of course very active elsewhere and absent sometimes... During my absences, many times peoples came to suggest someone as imam instead of me...My friends always told them, "*We do have an imam, thanks.*"

But things began to become really complicated when a new Hakem (Prefect) was appointed in our district. One day he came here and told the others, “well, here, this land has been allocated.” Some well-intentioned people will build a new mosque and a mahzara right here... When I heard this, I spoke to the Hakem and I clearly explained to him that it would not happen like that and that we were already there, we had an order from the wali that recognized our mosque etc. He told me that the project was important and that it was going to benefit the whole community etc. He did not want to hear anything, he wanted to allocate a part of the land to someone else and appropriate the rest to resell and use it to make some money for him. So, I gathered the entire group of worshippers from the mosque and I explained to them what it was about and that there was a choice to make” either they were ready to fight for their rights or we could all decide to give up and I would leave. After a discussion, we decided to act and confront the authorities: I told them they must be determined, they must all show up the next day in front of the prefect’s office. We wanted create physical pressure on him, so that he felt that we were not going to let it go. The next day we were all there outside his office, he arrived and I spoke. I told him either he cancels his project or he could complete it, but if he built the premises we would be appointed as the official beneficiaries and partners. I told him that if his expropriation decision was final we would need to have a written decision from him. Otherwise, another option might be the status quo... He chose the latter option. So we won...

The fact that I remain imam without being a member of the party in power, the PRDS, bothered a lot of haratin who themselves were members of the PRDS. I remember that one of them was very threatening. He accused me of all evil and even wanted to stab me because I was not on their side politically and at the time the government’s party had been established everywhere in the country and crisscrossed the neighborhoods... My group had judged we needed some protection. They were going to see a certain Ndongue who represented the party (chief of the local branch) and who had considerable power. He was the representative of the authorities. He was an important official of the PRDS. His official job was ‘tax services officer,’ so he was a high government official... He visited us here and told me I should remain imam if a majority of the people agreed. Everyone agreed and at that moment, he instructed me to become

a sort of affiliate with him etc. I responded that this was out of question. I was opposed to President Taya's regime... Then he felt offended and created a group of worshippers opposed to my presence and my position as imam. They accused me of mismanagement of the mutual funds of the mosque. They vowed to put me out etc. Some members from my group began to dissociate from me, some to position themselves for my succession as imam...

I realized at that moment, the necessity to act and create a valid file. It was a race to which one of us will have the *ifada* (the approval form the department of Islamic affairs) as imam. I already had some certificates, some testimonies from my various teachers that proved that I had acquired the intellectual qualifications necessary to become imam... I contacted Ould Hamdinou, The General Secretary of the Mosques and Mahzara Committee, at the Ibn Abbas Institute. I contacted also another member from that committee, Mohamed Abdellahi Ould Kharchi. They came here to see me and assisted in the prayer. Then we held a meeting. I explained to them that we were attacked. Hamdinou recommended me to put all my papers in order immediately and apply in order to be approved as imam by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs... He asked me to find a certificate from the Mayor and from the Prefect that testified to my quality of imam here. I did this, while before I only had a simple paper that confirmed the existence of this 'place of prayer', not even a mosque... Mosque committee became involved and supported me. They put me in contact with someone at the Nouakchott Governor Central office (Wali of Nouakchott) and I spent six months of long, painstaking and exhausting application process but finally it ended in success... During all this time I had not said anything to my group about the steps I was making: I would disappear in the morning and come back at night. The day when I completed the dossier I convened a meeting after the night prayer and told them that the matter was over and that not only was I recognized by the State as the imam, but at the same time our plot belonged to us once and for good. It was at that moment that things were finally back to normal, but we still just had a shack that served as a prayer room...

At the Mosques Committee, they told me that they encouraged the haratin imams and that it was a period where they were desperately looking for some of them to help, but at the moment they had only supported nearly sixty in all the country... They

sent me to meet up with the local representative of a Saudi charity specialized in the construction of Mosques. The charity is called The Al-Haramain Establishment (*Mu-as'asatu al-haramain*). I went there and the person in charge was a fellow from The Sudan. He came to pray here on the following Friday. I remember that he told me that my khutba (sermon) was one of the most interesting he ever heard because I talked about concrete issues etc.. For him, my khutba had a real meaning... We consequently set down the dossier and after six months, he came to see us to say that the financing had finally been approved and that we were going to begin building the mosque. A little time later, he came back to see me and told me that he was going to begin the work with a Tunisian entrepreneur, but that once the work was finished, his foundation would name an imam from the outside. So I said to myself, if I refuse we would lose a great opportunity. So I decided to let him start the construction and use that time to seek additional papers that would help me have an even stronger set of certificates as a skillful imam. I preferred not to react before the construction site was started. As soon as the construction site had officially been started, I started my own process. I went to see Bouddah and the others people who taught me. They gave me certificates and attestations stating that I had enough knowledge and skills to be an imam. I even went to see all the scholars that I knew and I went to see the imam of the Central Nouakchott Mosque and he told me: I will be more than happy to write a letter of recommendation because all these important scholars could not be wrong about you and anyway you seem to be a nice guy... Then I called the Sudanese man and I told him that I wanted to stop the construction site if there was question of another imam and that I no longer wanted his funding. I knew very well that he could not back off. I understood that he was manipulated by some people who were hostile to me. These people are maybe racist and therefore hostile to haratin imams. Ultimately, things went back to normal when he saw my determination. Of course, afterwards, the Sudanese man excused himself and thereafter, the construction site was completed and we inaugurated it with the government officials and everything etc. Obviously, I remained the imam there. We have a full compound, some readings rooms, my own apartment as you can see... but something was left to be achieved. I am an al-Haramain Establishment sponsored imam,

I was then supposed to receive a regular salary... and I started receiving my official salary from Saudi Arabia six months laterThe process was completed...

Ever since, I continue to learn and teach; one of my most important findings in *fiqh* is that of the difference between *al-furu* and *al-usul*: The foundations (al-kitab,al-sunnah) and the *furu*, the annexes etc. Discovering that distinction has been a huge shift in my knowledge acquisition process

Slavery is Illegal in Islam: an unbounded fatwa?

I asked Mbareck why he created the fatwa against slavery and in which circumstances. He accepted to contextualise the fatwa production, which he does also in the text of the Fatwa itself...

I wrote the fatwa against slavery because, like I said in the fatwa itself, I was shocked when praying in the Toujounine Mosque (well before having my own mosque) I was shocked to hear a renown scholar (Mohamed Fadhel Ould Mohamed Lemine who became later Minister of Islamic Affairs in 2003 I think), say that slavery as it exists in Mauritania is illegal in Islam. No one could imagine the shock that argument presented for me. It was the first time that I heard such a thing... I had done some research thereafter and I reached the same conclusion...The issue was actually debated quite often among us, the imams from haratin background. I remember in 2007, the National Association of Imams (Rabitat al-Ulama) convened a national workshop. The topic of the discussion was how the imams can contribute to Government decision to let the Mauritanian refugees in Senegal come back into the county. The government had decided to organize this return and we were asked to support the campaign. I remember that when it was my turn to speak I was very clear. As long as the refugees were Mauritanian national, it is obvious that they should return to their country and everybody should contribute in helping them to reintegrate the community. For me we did not need any debate on that issue. Their repatriation is urgent if they are interested. These were Mauritanian citizens who had been expelled from their homes unlawfully. I said, however, another problem should be raised here, namely that of slavery. Amazingly, when it comes to slavery, the main obstacle in my opinion is the fact that the ulema and the imams refuse constantly to tell the world that slavery is illegal in Islam.

Many other haratin took the flow and said the same thing. The haratin imams sparked a scandal that day. We have all been very offensive and we asked them to all proclaim that slavery is illegal in Islam. I even burst into tears while challenging the great Shaykh Mohamed Salem Ould Adoud. I urged him to proclaim that slavery was illegal in Islam. He would not and was very embarrassed. Plenty of people told us that slavery did not exist anymore in Mauritania etc. We told them that it does exist clearly and that they knew that. But they simply denied it; I remember that Ould Shawaf, the Director of the Islamic Orientation at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs told me “do not embarrass Shaykh Addoud please.” That was surrealist, thus the religious leaders refused to declare slavery illegal from the Islamic point of view... Therefore, I decided to produce my own fatwa on slavery...

I did this “research’ and wrote the fatwa. I even have an anecdote that shows that white people are treacherous. I wrote it and brought it to a ‘public secretariat’ in order to have it printed out, but they intentionally made typing errors. Several times I brought them the text and they always would leave incorrect spelling, errors, they would modify expressions in the text...

Islam does not permit slavery

Translation of the fatwa by Mbareck Ould Mahmoud:

“This is research on the reality of slavery (*haqiqat al-riq fi Muritaniya*) in Mauritania”

September 28 2009.

“Firstly: The identity of the author of the research is Mbareck Ould Mahmoud, born in 1970 in the wilaya of Trarza, a village near Al-Jadida, called Afjayjir. I was born in a family that is jointly owned by several families and we would move from one master to another. I was born and raised in this state and it affected me (*asabani*) and I saw the horror (*basha’ata*) of the false and falsified (*al-muzawar wa al-mak’dhûb*) slavery that was exerted against us until I turned ten years old. When we arrived from the countryside to the capital in 1980, we were suffering from the consequences and vestiges of slavery (*mukhlafat al-riq*) such as ignorance and poverty. These were the result of the slavery in which we were kept in the name of Islam, despite that Islam is innocent of

slavery (*wa-al-Islamu minhu bara'atan*) as we will demonstrate in this research. I implore Allah's help for this purpose.

When I became a religious student (*taliba ilmin*) in the year 91 of the twentieth century, I began to research the reality of slavery in this country. I did this because they told us slavery in Islam is lawful and we believed it, but the slavery that is practiced in this country is certainly not lawful. I will shed light on that argument (*nuwad'dîhu*) in this paper *Insha'Allah*. I must recognize that there have been bizan people who were against these practices thanks to Allah and it's because of that the Prophet had said that the ummah is never unanimous in perdition and error (*ummatî la tajtamîu alâ al-dhâlal*). I give examples of these scholars and fuqahas who were the triggers that prompted me to do this research that I have done. For example, I remember I prayed Fridays in the mosque located near the market in Toujounine in 1990 and there was a great scholar there (al-allama) Muhammad Fadel Ould Mohamed Lemine who gave a talk and one of the themes of this conference was about slavery and he said literally (*bil harf al-wahid*) that slavery practiced in Mauritania was illegal and that he had legal proofs (*adilatan*) that proved it was illegal. There was a commotion (*dajatun*) in the mosque. Mohamed Vadhel added to the intention of the audience: "those who own a slave should know that the possession of a slave is islamically unlawful." That statement is what gave me a new sense that the truth on this issue was going to come out, and when I quoted the Mahomed Vadhel as proof against the skeptics who believed in the legality of slavery, they told me that this was only politics. Much later after that, I was listening to a broadcast on the national radio called "*Manabir Mudhi'atun*" (luminous stands) directed by Ahmed Ould Neiny and the late Muhammad Mahfoudh Ould Mohamed Lemine, during the regime of Ould Taya. During this program someone telephoned to say that he prayed in a mosque which subsequently held a conference and the preacher there had said that the man who owns a slave woman can sleep with her without being legally married. The fellow said that the statement he heard at that mosque was problematic from his point of view. Therefore, he wanted to ask the hosts of the show their opinion. Ahmed Ould Neiny responded to him that this is in theory true, but the situation did not currently affect Muslim people since the kind of people who can do these kinds of things (*ahluhu*) no longer exist. The person who called was satisfied with

the response, but as soon as he hung up, another person called and questioned Ahmed in saying, "Why do you try to say what the Shari'a does not say? You are trying to please a social class." Then the late Muhammad Mahfudh Ould Mouhamed Lemine, the mufti of The National Radio, responded in saying "*listen, twenty years ago, around twenty scholars met for two months to study the reality of slavery in Mauritania and they did not find any legal proof of its lawfulness and the outcome of their research is available in the ministry of Home Affairs' archives and if you want to read it, it's available at the Ministry of Interior and at the National Archives. Case closed.*"

That was the response of the late Muhammed Mahfoud Ould Muhammad Lemine to this question and of the response from the Sheikh. If we tell this to those who are convinced about the legality of slavery, they tell us this is politics, these are fatwas and fuqhas of the State, and we do not accept them. They say that the viewpoints are not legal but driven by the political interest of the State...

Following what those scholars have said concerning this matter, I think it is my duty to bring my contribution (*ushariqa*) to clarify (*istidahati*) this thorny issue and thereafter I began to conduct personal research. I read fiqh books and the sunna books and what they said about servitude (*al-riq*). Whoever wants to check what I am saying can refer to these books.

I am beginning this scientific research (*hadha al-bah'th al-ilmi*) by explaining what has already been said about the issue of slavery ...

The research that I started deals with two things: is slavery found in the foundation of Islam (*usul*) or in the annexes (*al-furu*); whoever said that it is in the foundation (*asli*) misses the truth (*akhta'a al-saweb*) and whoever says it is in the annexes (*far'i*) is right. So the question is: what is the religious foundation (al-asl) for slavery. Jihad is the foundation. When there is a war between Muslims and the unfaithful (*al-Kuffar*), there are choices for Muslims after defeating the enemy which I am going to list in this research Insha'Allah The Very High (ta'ala) said "*wa-idhâ lakaytum alladhina kafaru fa darba al-riqab, hatta idha athkhantumuhum fa shidu al-withaq fa amma mannan min badu wa amma fidaân hatta tadaâ al-harbu awzaraha...*" This verse speaks of five choices, Shaikh Khalil Ibn Ishaq said in the book al-Mukhtasar de Khalil, in the chapter dedicated to the Jihad that the imam, the leader (imam) of the Muslims should consider

the unfaithful (al-kuffar) captured during war through five choices that must be adopted to suit the Muslims:

- 1- Kill them if the Muslims fear an attack against them by these same infidels
- 2- Release them without any compensation
- 3- Ransom, that's to say they pay money (amwalan) for their freedom
- 4- Fourthly is the (al-jizya) which is an amount of money imposed upon those people who leave under the protection-authority (al-Dhima) of Muslims
- 5- Enslavement (*al-istirqaq*)

That is what Khalil says concerning slavery - End of what Khalil's saying (*intaha qalam Khalil*). .

The Shaikh Sayid Sabeq in his book "*Fiqh al-Sunna*" in the chapter "slavery" said that no text in the Qoran allows slavery. It rather calls for liberation and it has not been established that the Messenger of *Allah Peace be upon Him* has reduced any prisoner to slavery. He even liberated the slaves of Mecca, those of the tribes of Ben al-Mustaliq and Hanin, and it is well proved that he has, Peace be upon Him, freed those he owned as slaves during the Jahiliyya and those who were offered to him. Although rightly guided caliphs enslaved some prisoners on the basis of reciprocity, [The Prophet] Himself has not allowed slavery. He restrained it rather to the case of a lawful war declared between Muslims and their unfaithful enemies. Any other form has been rejected and considered illegal and cannot be legal in any case. This was what Sayyid Sabeq said in his work *Fiqh Al-Sunna*. He said that Islam had limited and restricted the sources of slavery, and moreover, treated slaves well and opened the doors of liberation for them widely, as it is clear in what follows. Islam treated slaves well (*ah-sana ala al-raqiq*) and extended a hand of mercy to them (*basata lahum yada al-hanan*) and has not insulted or neglected them as it is clear in the following words of the Very High (*wa- abudu allahu wala tushriqu bihi shai-ân... up until he says wa-ma malakat aymanukum*). According to Ali Allah Be Pleased with Him, The Prophet would have said: "*Fear Allah in what you own*" and advised against using the term slave for that could suggest humiliation or subjugation when said "do

not say my slave or my servant but my boy (*ghulami*) or my girl". He said that they be nourished from the same food and with the same clothes of his master and forbid the violation of their rights (*dhulmihim*). According to Ibn Umar, The Prophet said '*The one who hits or strikes his slave must redeem himself by freeing him.*' This is taken from the book *Fiqh al-Sunna* by Shaikh Sayid Sabeq. End of what he said.

Boubacar al-Jaza'i in his book *Minhaj al-Muslim*, when he deals with slavery in Islam, he explains that the scholars have been divided and could not agree on what kind of treatment should be reserved for prisoners captured during a war waged against the 'unfaithful'. Is it necessary to kill them, to liberate them for ransom (*yufdaw'na*) or release them or enslave them; the differences among the scholars were related for example to the verse where Allah says "*fa darba al-riqab...*" and so on. The meaning is clear at least regarding slavery, that slavery is part of the five choices presented above. It's a choice among five others. It appears in the fifth place. End of what the scholar said.

Abdel Hamid Kichk *Rahimahu Allah* commented, in his cassette number 285 entitled "*al-Istimna'*," on some verses, like al-Mi'raj when Allah says: "*illa ala azwajikum aw ma-malaqat a-ymanukum fa-innehum ghayru malumuna.*" The Sheikh said that the slave woman can be taken directly to marry, but that in order to do this, four conditions must be met:

- the first condition, there is a war between Muslims and the unfaithful and this war was conducted to raise the word of Allah (*li'lai qalimati Allah*)

- the second condition, the state governs with the Qoran...

- the third condition, there has not been a convention between us and our enemy on the exchange of prisoners, because it is the duty of Muslims to recover their prisoners captured by the infidels

- the fourth condition: that the war was decided upon by the Commandant of The Believers (*amir-al- Mu'minin*) That's what Kishk has said on legal slavery, end of the quotation of Kishk may Allah bless his soul. The author of this research can support what Kishk said with verses of the Qoran. The verses that support what Kishk said are from the sura of the al-Baqara "*wa qatilu fi sabilillahi allah - alladhina yuqatilunakum wala ta'tadu inna allaha layuhibu al mu'tadina;*" [Qoran 2.190 *Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God loveth not transgressors*] ; the verses taken

from the chapter al-mum'tahana that's when Allah says "*la yanha-kum Allahu ani al-adhina lam yuqatiluna-kum fi al-dinni walam yukhriju-kum min diyari-kum an tabar'u wa tuqsitu ilayhum ina allaha yuhibu al-muqsitin, innama yanhakum ani alladhina qataluk-um fi al-dini wa akhrajukum min diyarikum wa dhaharu ala ikhrajikum an tuwaalluhum waman yatawallahum fa ula-ika hum adhalimun.*" [Qoran 60.9: God only forbids you, with regard to those who fight you for (your) Faith, and drive you out of your homes, and support (others) in driving you out, from turning to them (for friendship and protection). It is such as turn to them (in these circumstances), that do wrong]

This is clear evidence that the Muslims do not attack the unfaithful. *In the kitab al-istinad* by Hamed Ben Ahmed Ben Al-Mukhtar Al-Khui in the *Kitab al-Taysîr wa al-Takhffif wa raf'al-haraj fi al-taklîf* (**unclear in the original text**) in the eighth virtue (fa-ida) in the capacity of the Qoran to guide towards the best way (*hadyu- al-kor'ân li al-latî hîya aqwam*) in the subject of slavery, he said that from the advent of Islam, slavery existed. Whoever did not pay his debts became a slave, whoever was conquered/dominated (*ghuliba ala am'rihi*) was enslaved and the origins of slavery were very numerous (*asbabuhu muntashiraton*). Islam set up a gradual system conforming to the methodology of Islam in dealing with problems and it ordered to dry out these sources and repealed all of them except that which concerned the unfaithful fighting Allah and his Prophet. Islam opened its doors wide in order to abolish slavery and in this context the author of *Adwa al-bayan* said that Allah created human beings so they might become his slaves in worship (*li-ya'buduhu*), Allah said "*Wa ma khalaqtu al-jinâ wal-însa ilâ li ya'bûdûnî.*" End of the word of Sheikh Hamed. And that is a way to honor the human being (al-insan). **That's what is in the work of Hamed about slaves and there remain many aspects that I have not covered due to fatigue.**

The Imam Mohamed Ben Ali Ben Mohamed Al-Shawqani in his book *Naîl al-Atwar, sharh munataqa al-akhbar li ahadîthi sayidi al-akhyar*, chapter about "the miscreant slave," If he becomes Muslim, he is free. The imam also said in the same chapter: according to Ibn Abbas, Allah be pleased with him, the Prophet on the day of Taif freed all the slaves of the unfaithful. Hadith reported by Ahmad; According to Asha'abi, according to a man of the *Thaqif* tribe, the latter said: we have asked the Prophet PSL to give us Abi Bakratin who was our slave and who was Muslim before we owned him, The Prophet said 'No, he is free thanks to Allah and his Prophet (*hurun tâliqun lâlahi wa lâ*

rasulîhi'), hadith reported via Abu Daud. So, according to Ali Allah be pleased with him, the day of Al-hudaibiya, two slaves met with the Prophet, so their master wrote to him saying, "they do not join you with love of your religion, but they simply flee slavery;" some then said to the Prophet, "It's true, send them back to him;" then the Prophet became angry: "You will never stop that, Oh people of Qoraish until Allah does send someone who will cut your necks because of this" and he refused to return the slaves and said: "These are the emancipated slaves of Allah," hadith reported via Abu Da'ud. End of quotation by Muhamed Ben Ali Ben Muhamed Ali al-Shawqani in his book.

And after these words of the Sheikh, what follows is the commentary of the author on this research.

This is proof that the Islamic State (al-dawala al-islamiya) freed people from slavery and from oppression and it's because of that slaves of the unfaithful took refuge there and asked for protection and not so that the State could enslave them. This is what the Prophet and his prestigious companions (*ashabuhu al-qiram*) have created. Islam has defended the oppressed and even the unfaithful enslaved *illegally*...So, how then can a Muslim enslave his Muslim brother? The Prophet said, "Every Muslim is sacred to the Muslim: his blood, his property, his honor," reported by *Muslim*...

Finally, the truth that I reached through this research in what scholars and books have said about slavery, and whether it is a foundation (*aslan*) in Islam or an addition (*far'an*)? For me it has proved an addition, because the foundation is jihad, when there is a jihad, there are five choices, namely the release without compensation (*manan*), ransom (*fida'an*), execution (*qatlan*) or imposition or slavery. That is what I *discovered* in the course of this research. That is why I would like to title it "The revelation of the truth" (*istikshaf al haqiqah*). What is the goal of this research? It is so the people discover that slavery in Mauritania is unlawful in Islam. Slavery did much harm to Muslims and that it is the object of much negligence and humiliation in their honor and their personality and that it is not allowed by Islamic law (*la yajuzu shar'an*) because the Prophet said "Allah reveled to me that you must be modest so that no one oppresses anyone and no one humiliates anyone," according to *Muslim*. And Allah said, "Ya ayuha al nasu...ina allahu alimun khâbîr." Moreover, the Prophet says: "Every Muslim is forbidden to the Muslim: his blood, his property, his honor," reported by *Muslim*. And the way some

people look at slaves with disdain (*izdira*) and they want them to remain at the back of the caravan (*fi dhayli al qafila*) and I tell them “We will not stay by the will of Allah at the back of the caravan because Allah said “*Nuridu an namuna ala lathini ustidifu vil ardi, wa najâlahum îmatan wa najâlahum al-waridhin;*” [Qoran, 28.05: *And We wanted to confer favor upon those who were oppressed in the land and make them leaders and make them inheritors*]

We are not preaching division or racism, may Allah protect us from that, but we are preaching love and fraternity and mutual respect in the hearts of the Muslim people. We do not wish to dig up (*nab'sh*) the past, we only ask for equity, justice (*insaf*), the disclosure of the truth (*ihqq al-haq*), justice and equality in all public affairs (*fi al-umuri kulliha*)...